

# HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Volume 29 : Number Four : Winter 2008

Grief

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Leadership

Abuse

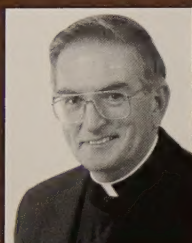
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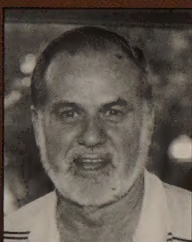
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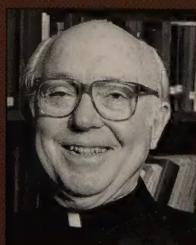
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**JAMES J. GILL, S.J., M.D.**, a priest and psychiatrist, died peacefully on July 29, 2003, after a courageous battle with prostate and bone cancer.

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The editors of *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT* are pleased to consider for publication articles relating to the ongoing work of those involved in helping other people through religious leadership and formation, spiritual direction, education, and counseling.

Manuscripts should be submitted to the Executive Editor, Linda Amadeo, either (1) as e-mail attachments in any Windows-based (not Macintosh) word-processing program from 2000 or earlier or (2) by mail (see addresses below). Unaccepted mailed manuscripts will not be returned unless submitted with a stamped, self-addressed return envelope.

Manuscripts are received with the understanding that they have not been previously published and are not currently under consideration elsewhere. Feature articles should be limited to 4,500 words (15 double-spaced pages), with no more than 6 recommended readings; filler items of between 500 and 1,000 words will be considered. All accepted material is subject to editing. When quoting the Bible, the New Revised Version of the Bible is preferred.

Authors are responsible for the completeness and accuracy of proper names in both text and bibliography. Acknowledgments must be given when substantial material is quoted from other publications. Provide author name(s), title of article, title of journal or book, volume number, page(s), month and year, and publisher's permission to use material.

Letters are welcome and will be published as space permits and at the discretion of the editors. Such communications should not exceed 600 words and are subject to editing.

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# Editor's Page

## HOPE IN HARD TIMES

As I write this page, in the middle of September, the world seems a rather dark and threatening place. Haiti, Cuba and the southern parts of the United States have been devastated by Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. Floods have ravaged parts of Great Britain, Europe and India, and earthquakes and floods rattle parts of China. Many wonder if global warming, a likely cause of some of these climactic disasters, has reached the point of no return. Meanwhile China is reeling from news of the introduction of a dangerous contaminant into milk products, especially baby formula, apparently done to increase profits. A huge suicide bomb blew up a hotel in Pakistan, only one of an almost daily dose of such terror attacks in many countries. The meltdown in the United States' mortgage and stock markets threatens not just the U.S. but the whole world with a major depression that will only exacerbate global instability. Feelings of hopelessness and despair are in the air. It is hard to predict how the world will look when you receive this issue of HUMAN DEVELOPMENT.

No matter how the world will look, I do know that you will receive this winter issue during the season of Advent or Christmas. As I have written in these pages in other winter issues, Advent and Christmas are seasons of hope not just for us as individuals but also for our world. But the fact that, in the Northern Hemisphere, this season comes at the darkest time of the year, serves to bring home to us that our hope is not based on things seen, as St. Paul intimates. These days of little light and long nights are not conducive to optimistic thinking. In these northern climes many people suffer Seasonal Affective Disorder and are advised to use special lighting to lift their spirits. And while the day after a snow storm can be beautiful as the sun shines on pristine white, soon, we know, that loveliness will give way to dirty slush, gray skies and dark thoughts. In addition, many homeless and poor people suffer terribly in winter climes and their plight touches all of us. This season reminds us, indeed, that any hope we have cannot be based on what we see around us. Scripture reminds us: "For in hope we were saved. Now what is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what

is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Romans 8:24).

And, of course, that is exactly the message of the Advent readings from the prophets, especially Isaiah. When the prophets proclaimed these messages of hope, life was rather bleak for the Israelites. The prophet known as First Isaiah spoke of God's promise of a world where wolves shall live with lambs, and children will not be in danger. He wrote at a time when the Northern Kingdom had already been destroyed and Judah, the Southern Kingdom, was threatened by powerful enemies on all sides (cf. Isaiah 11:1-11). When the prophet called Second Isaiah began his prophecy with "Comfort, O comfort, my people" (Isaiah 40:1), the people were in exile in Babylon, living in an alien land with alien masters. They were separated from the Promised Land by a desert and were held in bondage by superior force. When both these prophets spoke words of hope, the Israelites could see no reason to hope looking at their reality. Yet their reality changed for the better. So, too, in our dark time let us hear these words of Advent as addressed to us, to put our hope in God's dream for our world and to pledge to join in God's work of bringing about such a peaceable kingdom.

The Christmas season reminds us, too, that God has joined us in this real world as a fellow human being. God not only has a stake in this world because of creation but has become so enmeshed in it that what happens in it touches God directly through the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth. Our hope rests on our belief in the Incarnation, in the "flesh-taking" of God. We believe that God has now become part of this reality in the flesh. God cannot abandon the world without abandoning Jesus of Nazareth. No matter how bleak things get, we need to recall this central tenet of our faith: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16-17). We have hope because we believe in Jesus as



the Son of God who is one with us in our struggles, our fears, our darkness and our light.

Hope gives us courage to live as the images of God we are created to be, to be the light of the world and salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13-16). Even in the bleak times of plague that bedeviled cities, early Christians found within themselves the resources (grace) to take care of their neighbors, pagan and Christian, so much so that the pagans noted how Christians loved one another. As a result of their care for one another and for their pagan neighbors they lived through the plagues at higher rates than those who abandoned those in need. In these dark times we need to keep their example before our eyes and hearts. Our task as a people of hope in God's bountiful goodness and world-embracing love is to be images of this God in our own neighborhoods, communities and work places, to be light in these dark times.

This issue, I hope, will aid our task to be light for the world. Some articles touch on thorny issues that need addressing. Monica Applewhite, for example, raises the issue of teaching children about how to prevent sexual abuse from the wealth of her experience and knowledge of the research and concludes that we Christians, especially Roman Catholics, need to engage in the heated debates about this issue. George Wilson, with his usual deft touch, helps us to realize that sometimes our experience may bring us into conflict with our religious traditions and gives us some pointers on how to proceed. Fr. Shokoloko Bangoshe, a pseudonym, reflects on the very sensitive subject of how the Christian churches deal with homosexuality in Africa. James Torrens, S.J., whose poems and essays have graced this magazine's every issue almost since its inception, confronts our culture's disinclination toward commitment, contrasting it with the commitment of his Rwandan Jesuit friend. Fr. Damian Ference, in an article reprinted from *Commonweal*, invites priests of different generations to engage in dialogue rather than in recriminations; his reflections so touched me that I asked for permission to reprint the article not only for the sake of priests but also for the sake of many in the church who are mired in fruitless recriminations that do not lead toward reconciliation and community. In addition, we have articles that offer sage advice on various topics, Diana Viellegas on the ideal of Christian marriage, Sr. Regina Bechtle on Spirit-led leadership and Mary Elizabeth Kenel on grieving. I want to thank Mary Elizabeth Kenel not just for this article, but for her frequent and wise articles that have brightened issues both during my term as editor and before. We

end with a lovely meditation by Brenda McLaughlin on how her priest's life and death showed her how love trumps fear.

This brings me to my final comments. "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Five years ago my season as editor of HUMAN DEVELOPMENT began, and with this issue it ends. At that time the founding editor, Jim Gill, S.J., was approaching the end of the larger journey all of us are on and asked Fr. Michael Sheeran, S.J., president of Regis University, to take over the publication of the magazine. I am deeply grateful to Fr. Sheeran for his trust in asking me to be the editor. It has been a good run for me. I have been privileged to continue this service to the church throughout the world begun by Jim Gill 30 years ago. During these five years I have been greatly helped by the members of the Advisory Board who have been so generous in their suggestions for themes and articles and in reading and evaluating articles; a number of them have also contributed valuable articles themselves. Loughlan Sofield, S.T., and Brenda Hermann, M.S.B.T., have not only provided continuity with the spirit of Jim Gill but also invaluable advice and evaluations as Senior Editors. Kate Sullivan, who does not appear on the masthead, does so much behind the scenes to make the magazine work that I find it hard to think how I could have done it without her presence in the main office in Connecticut. Finally, I know that I would have refused Fr. Sheeran's request if I did not have the assurance that Linda Amadeo would remain on board as Executive Editor; I could not have done my job without her wise counsel, sound judgment and unfailing support. Paul Brocker and his staff at Regis University have done wonders to improve the look of the magazine and to support me as editor, and Kathy Schmitt has been a great copy editor. Of course, without authors who can write well and convey wisdom there would have been no HUMAN DEVELOPMENT to edit. So I come to the end of this season with a grateful heart, grateful to all those just mentioned and to all of you readers who have been so supportive. I leave the magazine also with hope and trust in its future under the editorship of Robert Hamma, who has already begun to attract new writers to carry on the mission.

*Bill Barry, S.J.*

William A. Barry, S.J.  
Editor-in-Chief



# SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION VIA CHILDREN'S AWARENESS PROGRAMS: is it worth a fight?

Monica Applewhite, Ph.D.

In June of 2002, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops developed and approved the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. This document provided the Catholic Church in the United States with a blueprint for preventing and responding to sexual abuse. Contained within the document were strategies for prevention of sexual abuse that were designed to help Catholic organizations and families protect children in all aspects of their lives, namely Article 12: Safe Environment programs. The article reads:

Dioceses/eparchies will establish "safe environment" programs. They will cooperate with parents, civil authorities, educators, and community organizations to provide education and training for children, youth, parents, ministers, educators, and others about ways to make and maintain a safe environment for children. Dioceses/eparchies will make clear to clergy and all members of the community the standards of conduct for clergy and other persons in positions of trust with regard to sexual abuse.





## The decision by the Church to educate young children about “self-protection” from sexual abuse put us squarely in the middle of a debate.

Sounds good, right? Well, it is good. Through the implementation of this article, Catholic dioceses around the country have educated millions of adults and young people about how to detect and respond to warning signs of sexual abuse. But there is more to the story.

You see, one of the things that occurred in 2002, without our even realizing it at the time, was that suddenly we became part of the so-called “sexual abuse wars” that had already been raging around the country for more than two decades. In particular, the decision by the Church to educate young children about “self-protection” from sexual abuse put us squarely in the middle of a debate among advocates, educators, social workers and clinicians about just how effective and appropriate these school-based programs really are. Other battlegrounds in the sexual abuse wars include debates on the reliability of children’s testimony, the validity of repressed memories and the frequency of false allegations of sexual abuse. Because I work with sexual offenders and have developed abuse prevention programs, I have been asked on a number of occasions to “weigh in” on various aspects of these debates. The discussion that follows will be limited to consideration of sexual abuse prevention programs for young children and the question of whether we should withdraw from this particular battle or perhaps engage ourselves more fully in the debate.

### BACKGROUND

Awareness of sexual abuse as a wide-spread, traumatic experience for children began to grow in the late

1970s. Shocking prevalence studies were published that showed for the first time that a significant percentage of boys and girls experienced sexual abuse in childhood. As a result, public schools and other community organizations began to provide programs for children to teach them how they could avoid abuse. Conceptually, this methodology was a departure from prevention programs for other forms of child abuse (i.e., we don’t try to teach children how to avoid physical abuse, emotional abuse or neglect). At the time these programs were developed, little was known or understood about the dynamics of sexual offenders or sexual offending. Nevertheless, sexual abuse prevention programs were widely adopted, particularly in the public schools and by 1990 approximately 85% of the school districts in the United States were offering sexual abuse prevention programs to elementary school children. The programs themselves vary in format and content, but most programs teach certain basic concepts:

1. Concepts of sexual abuse, personal safety and body safety.
2. The distinction between acceptable and unacceptable touch.
3. The appropriateness of saying “no” in an unacceptable situation.
4. The need to tell a trusted adult about what happened.

The programs may be facilitated by teachers, experts in the field (including the developers of the materials), parents and/or volunteers.

### DO THE PROGRAMS WORK?

Much of the research evaluating the effectiveness of children’s abuse prevention programs is not very convincing. Finding out that a child may learn to yell, “NO!” is not the same as determining whether a child could successfully accomplish “sexual abuse prevention.” After all, genuine “self protection” involves an extremely sophisticated skill set: a) discriminating between affection that is appropriate and affection that is sexual, b) making a decision to stop the affection from an adult who may well be important to the child, and c) saying or doing something to terminate the sexual behaviors of an adult without provoking the adult to use force. How one might measure such a behavior set is not immediately obvious, given both the complexity of the constructs and the ethical dilemmas



herent in any type of simulation. That said, there are three pieces of evidence that are compelling for me with respect to the question of whether programs for teaching children to "protect themselves" are effective: two are academic, one is personal.

First, the overall rate of sexual abuse in the United States is on the decline. After 15 years of steadily increasing rates of sexual abuse (from 1977 to 1992), reported and substantiated cases of sexual abuse began to decrease after 1992. Correlated problems, such as domestic violence, teen pregnancy and teen run-aways have also declined during this same time-frame, bolstering the argument that this is an actual change, rather than a just a measurement error. Second, a methodologically sound research survey found that among college students, those who participated in a prevention program were less likely to have been sexually abused.

These two pieces of information, together, are convincing to me at an academic level. Let me share what influences me on a personal level. In my work with sexual offenders it is common to discuss with them how they selected victims to abuse. By far, the most common explanation I hear is that there are some children who are simply more available to them: parents let them babysit, create a special friendship or "bond," and they are able to spend a great deal of unsupervised time getting close to certain children. Perpetrators of abuse also describe some children as more or less "resistant" to their advances, choosing to move forward with children whom they perceive as "more open to it." Listening to individuals who have abused, I often hear of the innocence of the children they target as well as of the parents of those children who did not realize their children were in danger. This kind of experience has had a motivating effect on me such that I find myself wanting to go "tell everyone" about how sexual offenders view and understand children and families and how offenders manage to get themselves into trusted roles with children, either in formal roles in organizations, or informally as friends of the family.

In fact, with my background experiences, one might expect I would be unhesitatingly in favor of large scale awareness and skills-training for children. Why do I, like so many Catholic parents, hesitate, ask questions and sometimes oppose programs designed to protect children from sexual abuse?"

**A methodologically sound research survey found that among college students, those who participated in a prevention program were less likely to have been sexually abused.**

## THE ISSUES

**Variable quality of programs.** To begin, all programs for children were not created equal. Some of the programs were based on research and have been studied to determine how effective they are; some simply have not. There are commercially available child-protection programs that were developed by individuals who "wanted to make a difference" and had good intentions, but did not study or research questions such as which teaching methods are most appropriate for a particular age group, what are the situations they are most likely to encounter, or what is the defensive strategy that is most likely to work? Many of these programs appear to be evaluating themselves based on the immediate response of the children, "We did a puppet show - they loved it!" Both as a parent and a professional, my expectations are higher than that. If this is essential content, we should expect a strong research basis in the development of the program and robust evaluations of the outcomes.

**Some content may not be developmentally appropriate.** A second area of concern is in the developmental appropriateness of the content. For example, many of the programs focus on "good-bad" or "appropriate-inappropriate" touching. Over time, research has shown that young children most often equate "bad touch" with painful touch, such as hitting or kicking and "good touch" with hugging or kissing. Suddenly to start describing affection as "bad" can sometimes be



**Knowledgeable parents are the most important safeguard for young children and the younger the child, the more important parents are to the solution.**

confusing, or more often just does not have an impact on the child's thinking or behavior over time. In addition, young children (under 8) have great difficulty conceptualizing that a "good person" can sometimes do a "bad thing" and vice versa. Most of the time, young children define the goodness or badness of others according to their behaviors, making these two concepts incompatible.

In addition, older children, such as 12 to 15 year olds, who are still at risk need more sophisticated materials that target the behaviors they are most likely to see. Adolescents should know that sometimes adults offer alcohol or drugs to young people in order to get close and to have something with which to blackmail them later. Sexual abuse prevention programs for children and youth should, at a minimum, take into account their cognitive and emotional development at each stage of childhood and adolescence.

**Questions about who should provide the instruction.** There are also many issues regarding who is most appropriate to provide the instruction to children and youth. Instructors may be teachers, experts in the field, parents, staff members or volunteers. Studies show that young children really only retain information related to assertiveness skills and other behavioral changes when they are periodically reinforced over time. This reinforcement is most naturally conducted by parents in real-life situations. However, over the past twenty years through today, we have found that parents are enormously difficult to engage in the process. Study after study has demonstrated that parents resist attending programs, fail to show up when scheduled, and, when they instruct their own children, often leave out key

concepts from the materials. Combining teacher instruction with parental instruction has been found to be the most effective methodology for young children, with the added benefit of educating parents of the children least likely to be able to self-protect. This is where our responsibilities as parents must be part of the solution for younger children. Knowledgeable parents are the most important safeguard for young children and the younger the child, the more important parents are to the solution. My hope is that we find new ways to understand and utilize the resource of interested, involved parents: both as teachers and as learners.

**New information about sexual offenders and sexual offending.** Since the 1980s and 1990s, when many of the programs for children were developed, researchers have published a substantial literature on the methods used by sexual offenders to select and groom children and their parents. Significant strides have been made in the past 15 years toward a richer understanding of warning signs, boundary violations and rationales that are used by sexual offenders to "explain away" behaviors if they are questioned. Materials for children and youth should be re-examined in light of the new discoveries to ensure that our current knowledge base about sexual offenders and sexual offending has been adequately utilized. Perhaps some materials no longer fit with what is known today. Perhaps new materials should be developed. It is essential for programs that educate children to have the benefit of materials that reflect a tremendous growth in understanding since 1990 and not to reflect dated stereotypes and myths about sexual abuse.

**SO, IS IT WORTH A FIGHT?**

We began this discussion with a question: Should we in the Catholic Church in the United States be part of the larger debate on sexual abuse prevention programs for children or should we simply listen and take the recommendations of others? Should we be part of the fight?

At the risk of upsetting others, let me state that I believe we are uniquely situated to engage ourselves more fully in the larger discussion. There are three reasons why: two academic, and one personal. First, we have spent the past six years developing and utilizing



educational programs for the prevention of sexual abuse and in the process we have educated millions of adults and children. As a large-scale organization that serves children, we have deliberately become one of the most knowledgeable in the country. We have an obligation to share what we have learned.

Second, we have debated, often fervently, among ourselves about these issues. Papers, articles, books and letters have been shared within our own venues and publications. Much information and fruitful debate has been exchanged within our own circles. Others who are considering the same topics can benefit from this discussion as well.

Lastly, on a personal note, I believe that as a church and as a people, we have been called to make protecting children from sexual abuse one of our special causes. A difficult calling to be sure, but one we seem capable of accepting. If this is true, then we have been asked to force change, first among ourselves and our own institutions, but ultimately for all children.

Will we continue to disagree both among ourselves and with others? Yes, I think so. These are difficult matters: complicated questions that are emotionally charged and highly important. In this debate we are talking about lessons that have the potential to change the course of a human life. I cannot imagine anything more worthy of a fight.

#### RECOMMENDED READING

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Monica Applewhite, Ph.D., has sixteen years experience in the research and prevention of sexual abuse. She has worked with more than 300 organizations serving children and youth and has helped develop national programs in the U.S. for the prevention of child sexual abuse.



# "Something Tells Me . . ."

George B. Wilson, S.J.



**M**y reflections begin with a personal experience.

In our office some years ago we had a secretary who belonged to a Pentecostal church. Let's call her Hannah. In lunch-time conversation she had mentioned that she and her husband gave financial support to some of the televangelists who were celebrities at the time. So it came as a devastating shock to her when Jim Bakker's sexual scandal became national news. Then, in the wake of his downfall another of the TV prophets, Jimmy Swaggart, publicly excoriated Bakker for his lust and fraudulent ministry.

It was clear that this sorry spectacle would be a painful experience for Hannah so I opened the door for her to unburden herself of her feelings. She was indeed quite broken-hearted. But then she said something I hadn't



expected from someone in her faith tradition: "I feel betrayed by Reverend Bakker. But something tells me that Reverend Swaggart's lack of charity and mercy toward his brother is worse than Reverend Bakker's adultery." *Something tells me . . .*

Hannah was stretching beyond the prevailing mind-set of her religious community, where sins of the flesh outrank anything else remotely called 'evil.' She was reaching into a place deep inside herself where the power of Jesus' compassion was at work. A place she couldn't have fully explained. A Gospel place, although the best she could offer in explanation for her response was "*something tells me . . .*"

That story took place in a private setting. A second event occurs on the big screen. Literally.

Recently on a local college campus I attended a screening of the fine documentary entitled *For the Bible Tells Me So*. In case you haven't heard about it, it tells the stories of several fundamentalist evangelical couples facing the terribly disturbing news that a son or daughter of theirs was gay. Some of the parents were highly respected ministers in their church communities, in small country towns where the situation became the central focus of church and town life. Each of the parents had reacted with shock and disbelief to the news. Some tried to get their son or daughter into treatment to change their orientation. One had brutally reviled her daughter's behavior, saying her soul was in danger; eventually the daughter hanged herself. No matter where one stands on the issue of homosexuality in the abstract, it would take the hardest of hearts not to be deeply moved by both the parents' pain and their valiant effort to be true to their understanding of the biblical message which was the center of their lives. Homosexuality was condemned by God, they feverently believed.

By the end of the film all had chosen to place their knowledge and love of their son or daughter above the position of their church communities, rejecting a literal proof-text approach to the scriptural writings.

The film cuts back and forth between revealing and difficult interviews with the different couples and each respective son or daughter. Though they were utterly convinced of the biblical rejection of homosexual behavior, the parents entered into serious study of biblical exegesis and began first to question, and then openly to challenge, the validity of the ordinary biblical proofs for the sinfulness of homosexuality. By the end of the film all had chosen to place their knowledge and love of their son or daughter above the position of their church communities, rejecting a literal proof-text approach to the scriptural writings. Some became public advocates against the vicious gay-bashing of people like James Dobson and his Focus on the Family.

Their explanations for the transformation that had taken place in them showed that *new knowledge* about the bible had played some role in it. But that didn't explain the fact that they were ready to venture beyond their fundamentalist boundaries in the first place. Something else was at work. Ultimately it boiled down to "*something told us*." Their personal experience of the integrity of their own child was strong enough to break through a life-long religious conditioning that had



A centuries-old Catholic theological tradition holds that what is called the *sensus fidelium* is a reliable source for ascertaining the genuine faith of the church.

supplied them with an unquestioned moat protecting them from disturbing complexity. The power of the Gospel they had absorbed all their lives enabled them to challenge what they eventually concluded was a false orthodoxy. *Something told us . . .*

The two stories clearly share a common element. The participants in each case were led, on the basis of “*something*,” through conflicting views of faith to a stance over against that of their religious tradition. What is the reality of that “*something*?”

#### A SOURCE OF DOCTRINAL GROWTH: THE “*SENSUS FIDELIUM*”

A centuries-old Catholic theological tradition holds that what is called the *sensus fidelium* is a reliable source for ascertaining the genuine faith of the church, alongside Scripture, the writings of the Church Fathers, magisterial pronouncements of the popes, and long-standing positions of theological masters. After all, the reality of Christian belief resides in the hearts of ordinary, sometimes untutored men and women long before it becomes the critical study of accomplished exegetes and theologians. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit before it is ever subjected to rigorous questioning and testing and finally judged to be orthodox. People have lived gloriously holy lives and performed deeds of heroic charity on the basis of an *instinctus fidei*. If they were asked to account in analytical terms for the source which enabled them to do what they did, their answer would reveal a form of religious intuition

with quite hazy boundaries. *Something told me*. That something was in the realm of faith, to be sure, but not easy to capture in analytical terms.

In a recent interview the newly elected superior general of the Jesuits, Fr. Alphonso Nicolás, testified to his recognition and admiration for this gift: “Now and then you see that without any theological training, without any formal education, some people have a depth of contact with God; it can be surprising, really surprising. I would say to myself: I wish I had this familiarity, this ease in relating to God.”

What constitutes that “*something*?” Can we explore it without destroying it by the very act of examining it? Let’s return to the two stories with which we began. What do they reveal, beyond the elusive “*something*?” Perhaps they provide some clues that might shed more light on the *sensus fidelium*, as well as suggesting fruitful avenues for further reflection on our understanding of Christian spirituality. Several components emerge. We can profitably explore them one by one, being mindful that they are inextricably intertwined.

#### CONFRONTING EXPERIENCE

As a result of unsettling choices made by others, the subjects in the two examples found themselves in spiritually conflictive situations involving a challenge to their respective religious traditions. Perhaps the first thing to note is that in neither instance did they opt to avoid, much less to deny the contradiction confronting them. Instead, as the narratives make clear, they allowed themselves to stand in the middle of two contending pulls, as disturbing as taking that stance might be. They allowed the full reality of the conflict to impress itself upon them. There was no choosing between the two features, no giving attention to one and allowing the other to fade off their radar.

Accepting the reality, they then named their resulting discomfort (Hannah) and brutal pain (the parents of the gay offspring). They were engaged in discernment of spirits, even though they did not employ that vocabulary. What weight would they give to their personal attractions and distress, what to the powerful social conditioning of their church traditions? Where is truth—and how do we recognize it? Where is the Lord?

Confronting the complexity of our human experi-



ce—standing within it, not shrinking from the discomfort—is always the beginning of spiritual discernment for a people whose source of life is Immanuel, God with us, divinity incarnate. The issue is not abstract orthodoxy but concrete response to embodied reality and what it evokes in us.

## THE CENTRALITY OF CHARITY

From the two stories it's also clear that what ultimately led to resolution of the unpeaceful reality of their experience was that they were held irrevocably by a profound sense of charity. In Hannah's case the loving behavior of Jimmy Swaggert pushed her to stand and with the already disgraced Bakker. (Swaggert's own hypocrisy and resulting fall only came to light later.) Hannah's care for the sinner trumped the mind-set of her religious community. In the case of the parents the love for their daughter or son was manifestly the power that gave them the strength to break free from a suffocating dogma. They eventually entered into liberating biblical exegesis, it's true. But I would venture to say that without the power of love they would never have risked such daring questioning in the first place. The Gospel mandate of love—not a romanticized abstraction but an interpersonal engagement with a challenging flesh-and-blood sister or brother—will always remain the ultimate touchstone for truth.

## FAMILIARITY WITH GOD

The articulation of Fr. Nicolás leads us into another vein of fruitful reflection. He speaks of “familiarity, this ease of relating to God.” Down through the centuries that rich gift characterized the life of many of our church's most revered saints. Love of our neighbor does not stand in isolation from the transcendent. Genuine love of God and love of neighbor are always and inextricably linked, however we try analytically to understand the exact nature of the linkage.

But when we focus on the “God dimension,” another, more unsettling feature also emerges. The God with whom we are invited into familiarity may indeed be all compassion but can also be, in the language of Moses, “a difficult friend.” Familiarity with God should not be equated with comfort. The God that both Hannah and the parents were in touch with did

The hard fact is that those who wrestle with conflicting spirits and come to the interior peace which signals the presence of the Spirit may still find themselves at odds with their church community and its guardians.

not make their choices easy. The God who is a difficult friend does not spare us the disturbing prospect of finding our way in the midst of powerful and discordant voices laying claim to our allegiance.

## THE RISK OF BEING “WRONG”

And that same God does not promise “success” when the issue is our relationship to religious authority. Members of their denominations would object that, as admirable as the parents' conscientious struggle for truth might be, in the end (especially in the case of the parents who publicly challenged the literalist understanding of Scripture) the “discernment” of these good people led them to a false conclusion, their sincerity notwithstanding. Fundamentalists believe the bible is still the literal word of God and sexual sin, especially homosexual sin, is still an abomination.

The hard fact is that those who wrestle with conflicting spirits and come to the interior peace which signals the presence of the Spirit may still find themselves at odds with their church community and its guardians. They may have found the best balance among the multiple sources of religious truth—for *themselves*—and yet their personal resolution is not recognized by the accredited arbiters of church teaching. What might eventually, over the long haul, be acknowledged to be a *sensus fidelium* is subject to the same, perhaps centuries-long process of sifting to which the other sources of settled teaching have always been subject. The church is always a community in pilgrimage, and that fundamental reality affects its search for truth as it does its search for holiness.



## THE CAPACITY TO STAND ALONE

The stories reveal another feature of genuine discernment. Part of the cost of standing within conflict, even when the gift of peace is finally given, can be what Dorothy Day called a "long loneliness." The consolation which is the confirming sign of the presence of the Spirit does not guarantee that others who confront the same issue will reach the same conclusion. In fact, if the one who has "found the truth" feels compelled to badger others to agree with the answer he or she has been given, that urge to manipulate others to offer such support might well be a sign of the false spirit, an illusory "peace." The Jesus who is Way and Truth and Life experienced that aloneness. He testified poignantly to his *desire* for companionship on the path he was called to undertake: "Will you also go away?" But though he himself "set his face like flint," he respected the personhood and freedom of those who would finally fail him. He loved his own to the end, but he would not compel them.

## A RESTLESS SPIRIT

Ultimately it comes down to our understanding of the Spirit. The same Spirit who guides the guardians of

orthodoxy is the Spirit of Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, a spirit which blows where it wills. "You can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from *or where it goes*" (John 3:8). With the gift of our freedom comes a two-edged sword. On the one hand we can be seduced by the illusion of an autonomous self not accountable to the Spirit challenging us through the wisdom of the faith community. On the other we can abdicate our responsibility as followers of Jesus by an uncritical submission to a sinful community all too ready to evade the painfulness of the dark by premature attempts to close questions best left open to the judgment of caring experience. The cross is never far from true freedom.



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# Homosexuality and Africa:

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS?

Reverend Shokoloko Bangoshe



Let me begin this brief essay on homosexuality in Africa with three quick confessions. First, I am an African. Second, I am a Roman Catholic priest in good standing. Third, I am heterosexual and live what I consider to be a well-integrated and healthy celibate sexuality. The choice to write this brief essay on homosexuality and Africa under the cloak of anonymity stems from two practical reasons.

The first concerns the patently hostile attitude toward homosexuality on the continent. Africa is a dangerous place for openly gay and lesbian people. The spectrum of hostility ranges from state-sanctioned persecution and prosecution to social ostracization and expulsion from ecclesial communities. The statute books of some African countries explicitly designate homosexuality as an offence punishable by death, and in several other countries impose life imprisonment or long jail terms. The African churches are no different.

The second reason highlights the culture of silence that pervades issues relating to homosexuality. The paucity of critical literature on homosexuality in African churches and societies reinforces this silence. In African churches this silence is imposed by force of ecclesiastical anathemas. Not surprisingly many African church leaders would find the title of this essay problematic, because they are the preponderant agents in propagating the notion that homosexuality



To deny the respect and dignity due people,  
whether heterosexual or homosexual,  
amounts to a culpable denial of the shared  
humanity and dignity of all women and men.

is not an issue for African churches. They dismiss it pejoratively as a “Western problem.” To be taunted as “American” is a subtle way of branding a person gay or lesbian. Quite interestingly, those who argue the foreign nature of homosexuality in Africa also make similar claims regarding contested issues such as optional celibacy, married clergy, and ordination of women. Yet pastoral experience leads to contrary conclusions. Thus, to continue to insist that the African church is insulated from these issues amounts to burying one’s head in the sand.

Taken together, the dangerous context and the culture of silence indicate the absence of an open platform in African churches and societies where the imperative of understanding the full range of human sexuality could benefit from a critical, meaningful, and constructive debate. This essay addresses this lacuna by focusing on three considerations that ought to inform and shape the debate on homosexuality in Africa, particularly in African churches. They are: (a) recognition and celebration of our common humanity, (b) a balanced appraisal of religion and culture, and (c) awareness of the pastoral challenges and opportunities of human sexuality.

#### FRIENDS NO LESS

Among my friends I can count many men and women who recognize themselves as gay and lesbian. These women and men are practicing Christians who believe in the goodness of God, just as I do. They recognize, accept, and celebrate their sexuality as an embodiment of God’s unconditional love. On occasion they struggle with the intricacies of their sexuality, just as I do. In our numerous encounters I consider it a privilege to share with them the experience of being loved into existence and endowed with dignity by God.

In the course of many years of ministry as a priest, I have also met African priests and nuns, as well as lay men and women, who are gay and lesbian. Sadly, they live a precarious existence, owing to their inability to declare and celebrate the inherent value of their sexuality openly, without risking the loss of their membership in the priesthood or religious life. Daily they suffer in silence the burden of hurtful prejudice and discrimination of religious leaders and superiors who utter magisterial pronouncements legislating the damnation of gays and lesbians. As I see it, those in the African churches who pontificate about the sexuality of other people must recognize that the debate over homosexuality concerns first and foremost human beings, not deviations, abnormalities, disorders, and other such homophobic characterizations. To deny the respect and dignity due people, whether heterosexual or homosexual, amounts to a culpable denial of the shared humanity and dignity of all women and men. The appreciation of our shared humanity distinguishes the Christian faith in God as creator of the universe, in whom we live and move and have our being—without exception.

#### WHICH AFRICAN RELIGION? WHICH AFRICAN CULTURE?

I have a deep appreciation for African religious and cultural traditions. My faith as an African draws on the richness of these traditions. Besides the Scripture, when some people typecast homosexual women and men as practitioners of an abominable form of sexuality, they routinely appeal to religion and culture in Africa for warrants. The argument from African culture and religion strikes me as extremely dangerous, not least because of its thinly veiled pretension to encompass the dynamic complexity and bewildering diversity of the continent’s sexual ethics in one facile generalization. I believe that, in fact, Africa’s religious and cultural landscape, in its complexity and diversity, permit a more favorable view of diverse patterns of human sexuality. At their root these religious and cultural traditions appear more tolerant of “alternative” lifestyles than certain homophobic assumptions would have us believe. Modernity did not invent homosexuality. Long before the advent of Christianity and colonialism in Africa, historical and archeological evidence points to the existence of homosexual relationships on the continent. While some of these may have been confined to ritualistic contexts—a fact which in itself is interesting, since that setting was religious—it was not unheard of among the general populace. Most antagonists overlook the fact that within contemporary cultures approximations of this kind of relationship continue to exist in Africa. In some parts of the continent there are



lively sanctioned relationships, such as female-female *mweto* marriage in Kenya, that are homosexual. This form of same-sex marriage relationship allows a woman to marry another woman, both of whom enjoy a relationship of emotional and psychological mutualism. Cultures are dynamic. African cultures and indigenous religions are not immune to change. To appeal to them as a means of castigating homosexuals betrays a connection with culture as a monolithic ideology fabricated to wound rather than to heal, to destroy rather than to build. African cultures represent a much more tolerant reality than sometimes depicted.

#### PASTORAL OPPORTUNITY LOST

Based on my ongoing experience of pastoral ministry in Africa, the lack of openness and the patently negative portrayal of homosexual love create an extremely difficult situation for people who recognize themselves as gays and lesbians. They have little or no venue to explore the challenges of their sexuality except in the anonymity of the confessional. Not a few African priests would admit to the seriousness of this pastoral situation. As a priest I have encountered this problem in opportunistic instances, such as overcrowded prison cells that are the hallmark of Africa's penal systems. I have also come across the problem in situations of abuse, such as pedophilia. Furthermore, young Christians have raised the issue in the context of their psycho-sexual development. It needs to be made clear, however, that none of these three instances necessarily constitutes a "problem" of homosexuality. My point is that not having a safe place to explore, discover, and celebrate the gift of one's sexuality other than a milieu of guilt, conflict, and shame distorts the intent and purpose of the pastoral care of the faithful. This is a painful situation for anybody to be in, whether he or she is homosexual or heterosexual. An even more serious consequence of this lack of pastoral care lies in the fact that it effectively removes the ability clearly to identify and adequately to confront genuinely deviant behavior, which may be misconstrued, classified, and simplified as simply homosexual tendencies.

The literature of human development agrees on the nature of human sexuality as a gift of God. Theologically, therefore, it qualifies as grace. To allow this fundamental article of faith to evaporate in the heat of controversies over homosexuality amounts to a missed opportunity for the communities of God's faithful in Africa. As church, we are called to act as Jesus did with inclusion of the other and respect for difference. The gospel came to Africa laden with a puritanical baggage. In the intervening years much has changed; Christianity has become native to Africa. Yet, in the name of this religion African church and civic leaders continue to stigmatize and discriminate against women and men whom they perceive to be different on account of their sexual orientation. Much of this betrays a fundamentalist reading of Scripture which insistently threatens with damnation and hellfire people whose sexual orientation is homosexual. When such trenchant tyranny emanates from ecclesiastical leaders, many of whom claim to represent the mind of God, the rest of the community is left no room to appreciate the other in his or her unique giftedness and difference.

In writing this essay I do not claim to speak for Africa's gay and lesbian people. At the beginning of 2008, seventy-five gay and lesbian activists held a conference in Maputo, the capital of Mozambique. The participants called for an end to discrimination and criminalization of homosexuality. The African churches have not even begun to address the issue, because many clerics still pretend that homosexuality presents no pastoral challenge to the community of God's people. Such a skewed perception denies the church a vital opportunity to recognize itself as it truly is: a community of women and men who honor, express, and celebrate God's abundant graces in diverse ways. In the words of one delegate at the Maputo conference, "As Christians we realize that the Bible doesn't discriminate, it embraces us in our diversity." Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the [African] churches (Revelation 2:29).

Father Shokoloko Bangoshe is a pseudonym for an African priest who wishes to remain anonymous.



# "I'M NOT THE COMMITMENT TYPE"



James Torrens, S.J.

## CHRYSOLOGUE

### I

#### My Letter to You

Since the stuffy old classroom  
and our return to our people, Chris,  
fifty years. So I have questions.

You were first of your people  
into our schoolmaster company.  
What resolved you to it?

Given your head for books  
and that shyest of smiles,  
what peopled your thoughts?

In the spasms of freedom, Uhuru,  
your works and days hid.  
What will your people tell me?

### II

#### Your Letter Back

They will tell you this secret.  
Bishops may have ordained us,  
the people made me a priest.

The word flowing from me,  
all my counsels to kingpins,  
said that both peoples be one.

Men with blood in their eyes  
saw otherwise. They had spears,  
my executioners, my own people.

Have I passed the test *ad gradum*?  
My arms are around my people,  
healing. For this we were born.



It is high time to speak of commitment, that is to say, of giving oneself to something or someone long-term, and then holding on. That takes determination, a sense of what is truly worthwhile, self-discipline, generosity. It takes good examples, to give us heart. I say it is high time because the ambience now is one of non-commitment. When it comes to making and holding to promises, the world fosters discouragement.

My own attention to this topic has grown. When I started college teaching in the Seventies, and living among the students, I could see them sign up with enthusiasm for some excursion or activity; but when the date arrived, half would fail to show up. Something better or more pressing had popped up on their screen. This was strange to me, on whom it had been inculcated, growing up, that if you give your word you keep it, most what that may. In the tradition, not entirely mythical, of the West, you shake on something and that seals it. There may be nothing down on paper, but there is no welching. How laughable this sounds now, which shows how far downhill we have gone.

I remember being shocked, at this same Catholic college, that graduates of the Business School would accept scholarships from some company for advanced study or would enter their training program, with every intention of jumping to something better as soon as it appeared. No commitment felt to the sponsor, in other words. That's just the way it is done, I was told. Ethics seemed to play no role. One must add, in the interests of fairness, that the companies who renege on loyalty to their long-time servants have weakened their own cause.

The divorce rate is notorious among us. I have no idea how high it is among those whose weddings, as a priest, I have solemnized, but I hope and pray it is below the norm. What has come closer to me is the departure from religious life and priesthood of men and women I have liked and admired, some early on, some after advanced studies, some after many years in the life and service. I try to be appreciative for the years and energy they have given to this call, but I have to acknowledge lingering regret.

A retreat master, Dean Brackley, S.J., put it to us recently that we are in a time of temporary location; permanent commitment is little valued. He referred to a commitment phobia. We don't want to close any door behind us. Then he said to us, "Guys, I want to count on you being there with me."

The change of climate is captured for me in an episode of the late Sixties, when I was in graduate

"The secret of life is commitment."

school at the University of Michigan. Celebrating its sesquicentennial, the school had a series of panels with distinguished speakers. Among them was John Courtney Murray, the Jesuit who had written about religious freedom and church-and-state relations so effectively but at the cost of criticism and strictures from his own church. At lunch with us Jesuit students, he wondered aloud at so many of our fellows who were giving up the ship, as it seemed, because of lesser disappointments and setbacks. He and his colleague, Father Gustave Weigel, he said, had puzzled over this phenomenon.

A host of complexities and considerations belong in this picture. In the case of religious women, for example, there must be sensitivity to all the factors that depleted their numbers during the post-Vatican II era. We rely on historians from among them to do that. Each story has unique elements, but the pre-Vatican II era bears a large share of responsibility.

My concern with commitment in the new millennium found a concrete image recently. Stepping out of a department store in Fresno, California, I fell in behind a young woman whose tee-shirt announced, "I'm not the commitment type." She and the young man with her were not sophisticates or hipsters, but young Latinos, part of the crowd, displaying a contemporary sentiment.

It is hard not to sympathize with a person who balks at commitment these days, who, for example, has fended off marriage for years. There is a lot at stake. I think about the old conversation between the hen and the pig. The hen is boasting about her daily contributions to men and women's health, the many eggs she provides. The pig responds: "That's well and good for you, all those contributions. Things are more serious



for me. I have to make a commitment." The self of the pig will disappear in the process.

In a certain way, the disappearance of the self is bad, says Margaret Guenther, speaking of women and spiritual direction. "By over-zealousness in their obligations toward others, especially husbands and children, and a corresponding neglect of themselves, women manage to avoid inner growth" (*Holy Listening*, p. 129). In a deeper sense, though, "careless abandon" is the goal of the spiritual journey, transformation in God. What a lot of discerning of spirits is called for!

Years ago, when I was still learning Spanish and taking part in an immersion program in Mexico City, I was stopped short by a poster in our conference room. It said: "El secreto de la vida es el compromiso." "What?!", I said to myself. "The secret of life is compromise?!" But I was far off target. "Compromiso" in Spanish means an agreement you intend to fulfill. It means you have said "Yes" to meeting someone somewhere at three o'clock, for instance, or more widely it refers to a spirit of dedication, for example the athlete with a rigorous schedule of practice. "The secret of life is commitment." That is more like it. Much more has to be said-about maturity, a wise process of decision, widening and deepening of perspective and motives-but that is what it comes down to. "The secret of life is commitment."

My thoughts these days keep coming back to a classmate of mine from theology school in Louvain, Belgium (1958-1962), Chrisologue Mahame. We were ordained together in 1961. Chrisologue, a Tutsi, was the very first Rwandan to enter the Jesuits. I cannot begin to appreciate what a big leap that must have been.

I knew Mahame in Belgium as very diligent at the books, very earnest and soft-spoken. In the following years, more and more, it seems, he became active for harmony among the two peoples of Rwanda, Tutsi and Hutu. It concerned him deeply. He promoted it, even at high government levels, from a retreat center in the capital, Kigali. But ever since colonial times resentments had been seething among the Hutus, ill feeling fed and finally whipped up by radio and other media. In the bloodbath of 1994, Chrisologue and his team were among the first targeted. They had known very well the risk they were running. No matter, the secret of life is commitment.



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# A CALL TO DISARM;

## Reconciling a Generation of Priests

Reverend Damian J. Ference

On the first Friday of every month, I join a dozen or so other priests for Vespers, drinks, dinner, and fellowship. Two things make this group unusual. The first is that five decades of ordination classes are represented at our gatherings. The second is that each of us is expected to have read an article that was assigned in advance and be ready to discuss it after dinner. At our Christmas gathering we unpacked “The Other Health Care Crisis” by Paul Tanosz, which appeared in the November 23, 2007 edition of *Commonweal*. It was because of our discussion that night that it occurred to me that the way that a generation of priests defines itself is often closely linked to how it suffers.

Before the sexual abuse crisis of 2001-2002, there was another sexual abuse crisis in the late 1980s; and even if it didn't manage to gather as much media attention as the most recent crisis, its impact must not be forgotten. Most Catholics of my generation find it difficult to remember a time when pedophilia wasn't widely associated with the priesthood. A dark cloud of suspicion has been hovering over priests for the past twenty years, and it has only grown more ominous with time. So, although much has been made about the distinction between the “servant-leader” model and the “cultic” model of priesthood, this is not, I think, the most important difference between generations of priests. In fact, the healthiest priests, of whatever age, seem to embody both the “servant-leader” and “cultic” models.





## Priests of my pastor's generation didn't have protestors at their ordinations.

I decided to enter a college seminary in late July of 1994. I had earned my high school diploma a few months earlier and chose to abandon my previous plans in order to follow what seemed to be God's plan. My parents were shocked but supportive. My older brother asked me if I was gay. An old friend made a remark about little boys.

I have been told that there was a time when the priest was put on a pedestal; when the priest was usually the most educated person in the parish; when a live-in housekeeper prepared three meals a day, did the laundry, and cleaned the rectory, which was usually filled to capacity. These were supposed to have been the "golden years" of the priesthood, when priestly vocations were abundant and encouraged, and the priesthood itself was thought to be a glorious vocation that would make mom, dad, and the whole parish proud. Not only was a vocation to the priesthood supported by the Catholic community; it was also considered a good thing by the culture at large. A life of service was to be commended. This is not to say that priests of that generation were without suffering. There was a dark side to this bright scene. Horror stories are still told about the days of rigid seminary formation, tyrant pastors, Forty Hours gatherings where priests could drink pirates under the table, and small-scale scandals of all sorts. For the most part, though, the reputation of the priesthood was in good shape, even if some individual priests were not.

The next generation, the one before mine, was also dealing with a world very different from the one we live in today. It came of age during or just after Vatican II. Vietnam was a war zone, and the sexual revolution was underway. A new age had dawned. For my first parish assignment, which lasted from 2003 to 2007, I was

blessed to be placed with a pastor who was ordained in 1968. He entered the seminary before the council, was formed as the council was meeting and ordained in what many historians consider to be the most turbulent year of the last century. He was ordained with thirty-three other men, only ten of whom remain in active ministry. I will admit that I had some initial prejudices about living and working with a baby-boomer priest. After all, I was what people now call, in praise or disdain, a John Paul II priest. On paper we really were not supposed to get along. But we were both sons of Vatican II, and we were genuinely interested in learning about each other's experiences of seminary formation. We also wanted to talk about our different understandings of the church, and about the direction in which we thought the church was heading. We also both liked being priests, and since we were going to be housemates for the next four years, we made it work.

Our best conversations took place at the dinner table. My pastor recalled memorizing the *Baltimore Catechism* in grade school. I told him about how I made collages about my feelings in religious-ed class. When he complained that his seminary formation had been too militaristic, I told him of my frustrations with a seminary formation that seemed too lax. When he spoke of the years he spent studying Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, I expressed embarrassment at not knowing how to chant the Pater Noster as I concelebrated the Mass with Benedict XVI at World Youth Day a few years ago in Cologne. When he expressed gratitude that the clerical dress code had been relaxed over the years, I said I thought it was important that the priest be a visible sign of the church, to remind the world that God is not dead. But when it came to the abuse scandals, we were on the same page — or at least in the same book. The scandals hit us both hard, though in different ways.

The generation before mine remembers a time of general stability and respectability within the priesthood. When my pastor's generation entered the seminary, family members did not ask him and his classmates if they were gay or attracted to little boys (though I am told there have always been people who thought there was something sexually suspect about priests). Priests of my pastor's generation didn't have protestors at their ordinations. Their suffering was different. They battled with pastors over implementing the teaching of the council, watched classmates leave the ministry in droves, and struggled to find a balance between the ordained priesthood and baptismal priesthood.

It was the priests ordained *before* the scandals who were hit the hardest when stories of abuse and cover-up broke a few years back. The men accused of abuse had been their classmates and friends, men with whom they had studied and served for many years. My older priest friends have a difficult time believing that as a church we are going to recover from the abuse crisis anytime soon, and of course they are right. The presbyterate that was once regarded as a community of good shepherds is now perceived by many as a pack of vicious wolves. Theoretically and even functionally the priesthood may be the same, but the experience and perception of it is now radically different. Many members of the older generation see no reason to invest hope in the future of the priesthood unless the church undergoes major structural change. This is where generations part ways.

When my generation entered the seminary, the reputation of the priesthood had already been tarnished. Sure, there was still support in parish communities and youth groups for a vocation to the priesthood, but it was nothing like what the previous generation had experienced. As seminarians, we knew that the days of full rectories were a distant memory and that we might be made pastors right after our first assignment—even pastors of more than one parish. We understood that the communal meals of the seminary were a kind of luxury, that we would likely be eating most of our meals alone once we were ordained. We also knew that the days of “father knows best” were gone, and that the laity had a vital role in the health and growth of the parish. (Most of us knew this firsthand because we came from families who were key players in the life of our home parishes.) We knew that the stakes were high. We also knew that we were maybe not the most qualified. But then neither were the apostles, and we took comfort in that: God qualifies those he calls.

The generation just after mine has it even worse. If people missed the news of the abuse cases in the late 1990s, they couldn’t ignore the barrage of stories that hit every major news outlet in 2001 and 2002. The enrollment at our college seminary in Cleveland dropped to an all-time low of nineteen students that school year. Many thought that another round of seminary closings was inevitable. But then something happened.

Just when the situation seemed to be at its worst, signs of hope were beginning to spring up. In my diocese, the enrollment at our college seminary began to

The church has always depended upon the idealism of young people to stand strong in the face of danger, persecution, and despair, and the faith of this new generation has been a great blessing that is only beginning to be recognized.

increase, and so did the quality of the seminarians. Our college seminary began the Fall 2007 semester with forty-nine students, and an uncommonly high number of our seminarians continue to make Dean’s List. Most of them are from the area, and most are studying for our diocese. Not every seminary is doing as well, of course, but a few are; and these few suggest that the situation is better than it was just a few years ago, and better than might have been expected.

What makes this phenomenon so fascinating is that these young men are actually drawn to the challenge and the sacrifice of the priesthood, to the fact that they may be persecuted, or at least despised, because of their vocation. They want to become priests not in spite of this difficulty, but because of it. They are eager to give themselves away, to lay down their lives in service of God and his church. I am afraid that this aspect of the priesthood has sometimes been obscured or soft-peddled, but no longer. Vocation directors have stopped talking about the priesthood as a duty or as a way up in the world and have instead begun talking about it mainly as sacrifice and adventure. The church has always depended upon the idealism of young people to stand strong in the face of danger, persecution, and despair, and the faith of this new generation has been a great blessing that is only beginning to be recognized.

Those who have entered the seminary since the scandal are sitting ducks, and they know it. They know that one accusation, whether true or false, may destroy their reputation. They realize that even in the eyes of many in the church, they will be considered guilty until proven innocent. They are fully aware that many parents will now watch them suspiciously at parishes and schools. And if somehow they didn’t know all this before entering the seminary, the years of workshops



The older generation needs the idealism and the enthusiasm of the younger generation, and the younger generation needs the wisdom, experience, and guidance of the older generation.

on boundary issues, intimacy, celibacy, human formation, and protecting God's children will soon teach them.

Over the past few years, *Commonweal* published a number of articles, editorials, and letters to the editor that comment on the new generation of priests and seminarians. Unfortunately, most of the comments have not been very encouraging. My generation has been described as intellectually second-rate, theologically deficient, arrogant, blindly loyal to Rome, authoritarian, gay, and out of touch with the laity. If these descriptions are accurate, the future of the priesthood looks bleak indeed. On the other side of the ideological fence, conservative journals and blogs praise this same generation of priests and seminarians for their orthodoxy, courage, fidelity, zeal, and pastoral charity. These observers joyfully predict that the new generation of priests and seminarians will restore what has been lost since the council and reinvigorate the church through strong and determined leadership.

So which is it? Are we part of the problem or part of the solution? That all depends on what one expects us to be.

I think it is discouraging to many older priests that we aren't more like them, but we have more in common with them than one might think. It is true that we often read different authors, pray in different styles, have different heroes, and emphasize different doctrines, but we celebrate the same Sacraments, preach the same Gospel, and share the same priesthood. It is also true that both my generation and theirs rebelled against a previous generation. Perhaps "rebel" is too strong of a word, but both generations did want to improve, by reformation and restoration, the weaknesses we inherited in order to better serve the people of God.

It is very easy to get defensive about this last point, but we shouldn't. To compare the generations of the priesthood to the generations of a family, it is clear that the older generation is responsible for instilling in the younger a strong sense of faith, identity, custom, and mission. The younger generation is expected to adapt these values to their own particular situation while remaining faithful to the tradition. But this practice of handing down a tradition only works when the different generations stay in touch. The older generation needs the idealism and the enthusiasm of the younger generation, and the younger generation needs the wisdom, experience, and guidance of the older generation. This is true for families, and it is equally true for priests. Sadly, in the last forty years, the communication between older and younger priests has broken down, and as a church we are poorer for it.

When I was a seminarian-intern I lived in a rectory with three priests, one of whom was a retired monsignor who had been ordained in 1938. He often told me how he felt rejected by the generation of priests that came after him. It pained him that the younger generation had little interest in his pre-conciliar priesthood, which they found antiquated. He longed to be a mentor and guide for the next generation of priests, but few had taken him up on his offer.

Somehow, this dynamic has repeated itself. It seems to me that priests my age have, knowingly or not, attempted to distance themselves from the generation that came just before them. Paradoxically for a generation often accused of being too traditional, we seem to want to move ahead without really knowing where the church has just been. And although most of us have a few older priests we look up to, we often assume that we have things all figured out, dismissing our elders as out-of-touch has-beens. This frustrates older priests who long to play the role of mentor and guide. Then again, when we do go to older priests for direction and guidance, we sometimes discover that they take little interest in our concerns and priorities. For many of them, we seem to be no more than a source of annoyance.

It doesn't have to be this way, and it shouldn't. The different generations of priests need each other for support, wisdom, experience, enthusiasm, inspiration, accountability, and fraternity. Priests cannot expect to be bridge-builders in the church if they are divided among themselves. There is an urgent need for reconciliation, and it starts with us. My generation needs to

hear the stories of priests from our parents' and grandparents' generations. We need to learn from the men who grew up during the depression, fought in the second World War, and were ordained before Vatican II—and we need to realize that there isn't much time left to hear their stories. We need to listen to our baby-boomer predecessors tell their stories about seminary life and priesthood at a moment when the church was in a major transition. Their generation has its own hopes and joys, triumphs and sufferings, and we need to hear about them. Too often we fail to appreciate their perseverance and faith through a very turbulent period of church history.

Finally, priests of my own generation need to be able to tell their own story, and tell it well. We need to let the older generations know what it's like to come of age in today's America without a strong Catholic subculture. We need to be able to explain what attracted us to the priesthood, and why we're so cautious about "the Spirit of Vatican II." Older priests should not be too quick to dismiss our concerns as fearful, ignorant, or reactionary.

Reading a magazine article about generational differences among priests may be helpful, but for me, the real learning and reconciliation takes place when I meet with a diverse group of priests for Vespers, drinks, dinner, and discussion of an article. This kind of gathering is still too rare. For the sake of the generation of seminarians currently in formation and for the general good of the church, priests of different generations must learn to talk to one another about their differences instead of nursing mutual suspicions.

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## How To Help Children Become More Altruistic

It appears that modeling altruistic behavior has the most impact according to research reported in *Monitor on Psychology*. Children whose parents were helpful to others fulfilled their volunteer commitments better than others. Classrooms that featured cooperative solving of problems became more cooperative and less prejudiced later. Psychologist Elliot Aronson, Ph.D., professor emeritus of the University of California-Santa Cruz, who devised such a cooperative classroom, said: "What has been emphasized in the past is that we are hardwired to be suspicious of people who are different from us. We're also hardwired to cooperate, but in a highly competitive culture, that gets submerged by aggressiveness and competition." Nancy Eisenberg, Ph.D., Regent's Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies at Arizona State University, found that altruistic children do grow up to be altruistic as adults. It appears that we can teach children to be altruistic, but not so much by words as by example and by cooperative teaching.

—Reported by Rebecca A. Clay in *Monitor on Psychology*, Winter, 2006, pp. 42-43.



# Married Love as Christian Ideal

Diana L. Villegas, M.S.W., Ph.D.



In this article I would like to offer an ideal of Christian marriage that can energize and motivate Christian couples of the twenty-first century. When an ideal captures our imagination, it can become a powerful motivating force, and working toward it offers deep satisfaction and meaning. An ideal deeply embraced is so energizing that persons are willing to sacrifice and give of themselves in extraordinary ways in order to accomplish their goals. Human history is full of examples. Led by political ideals, many have sacrificed their personal lives for the good of their country; East Europeans fought to liberate themselves from Soviet rule; many South Africans endured persecution and prison in their fight for freedom from apartheid. Scientific ideals such as landing a person on the moon led some to discipline themselves in order to become astronauts. Athletes engage in extraordinary discipline in their personal lives to become great. And, of course, many have made heroic sacrifices to live out the ideals of the gospel. One immediately thinks of saintly persons such as Mother Teresa giving up all comfort to serve the dying in the streets of India or Dorothy Day living in simplicity for the sake of the poor and the cause of social justice.

The goal of this article is to articulate the Catholic Christian ideal of marriage in terms of the tradition's view of married love. I hope to describe this ideal in such a way that it captures the imagination of twenty-first century couples so that they want to embrace it and order their lives in view of it. According to the Catholic tradition, married love is the form of human love that best resembles the love God has for us; and it best resembles the form of love God wishes us to have for God and for one another. By viewing married love as a model of God's love for us the Catholic tradition is presenting a very lofty ideal indeed, namely inviting married couples to love each other and their children as God loves us.

#### HOSEA, THE SONG OF SOLOMON AND VATICAN II ON MARRIAGE

The ideal of married love as a model for God's love for us begins in the Old Testament, where several authors told stories and wrote poems about married love to teach about God's love for us and about the type of relationship God wants with God's people.

The stories tell of love that cares for the good of the other, love that is able to forgive and love that is mutual. And married love involves desire for the other and life-giving joy in the sharing of love. Let us look at two Old Testament texts that highlight these qualities of love.

The prophet Hosea describes God's love as that of a faithful and committed husband offering love to an unfaithful wife, where the husband is God and the unfaithful wife is the people of Israel. While the prophet's story is about God's love for us, it is also a story about married love. (Since the Old Testament was written in patriarchal times the model is a faithful man; today we can equally read this story as that of a faithful wife.) The husband is hurt and angry at his wife's infidelity and abandonment; he wonders if punishment will get his wife to return. He then experiences a change of heart after struggling with the all-too-human desire to punish when one is hurt or angry. Mercy and compassion triumph, and he invites his wife to return to steadfast love on his part. Rather than punishment, he offers lavish gifts. Despite the wrongs committed, the husband offers tender love, not a begrudging return to business as usual. Indeed, the husband is willing to hope that the couple can take delight in each other as newly married persons. It is a story about love that forgives, love that has compassion for wounded-

ness and failure. The story shows a love that wishes to give to the other even after major betrayal and conflict, and an ability to enter into the experience of the other and accept the other's willingness to say "I'm sorry." The husband says,

Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth. . . . And I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord (Hosea 2:14-15, 19-20).

While the husband's love involves giving of self in offering forgiveness and compassion, it is also a love that celebrates human passion. The passion and desire for the other in the best moments of married love involve joy, aliveness and delight in another; these are all human experiences that are life-giving.

This aspect of married love is also described in the Old Testament in the Song of Solomon, a collection of wedding poems or songs included in the Bible because the love and desire of bride and groom for each other are seen as a model for God's desire and love for us. For instance, the bride expresses her delight in her groom's love. "As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow . . . he brought me to the banqueting house, and his intention toward me was love." And the groom describes his passion and love. "You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride, you have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes. How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride! How much better is your love than wine" (Song of Solomon 2:3-4, 3:9,10).

Catholic theology of marriage has taken up the Old Testament insight that married love is a model of God's love for us. For instance, in the Vatican II document on the *Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*, 48-50) marriage is described as a faithful partnership of life that reveals God's love for the Church and for each of us. Accordingly, part of the vocation of married persons consists in striving to give witness to such love. *Gaudium et Spes* devotes significant space to a description of what is entailed in marriage as ideal.



The qualities of married love described are similar to those shown by Hosea's story, while adding the importance of love that bears fruit in the commitment to raise children. But Vatican II specifies a dimension to the ideal of married love that is not highlighted in the Old Testament texts, namely that marriage involves love that is committed to shaping a mutual partnership of life.

**Mutuality.** Mutuality makes clear that the ideal of married love must be practiced by both spouses equally. Even in the patriarchal times of *Hosea* and the *Song of Solomon*, the bride delights in the groom as much as the groom in the bride. This is important to highlight because in Western culture there has been a tradition that women are the ones who care for the good of the other, the ones who forgive, the ones who must make the efforts to court back the husband. At their worst, these cultural norms (often intertwined with past interpretations of Catholic spirituality) resulted in marriages where the woman sacrificed herself for her children, while enduring a marriage that was hurtful at best and abusive at worst. This one-sided self-giving does not embody the caring for the good of the other or for the care of self implied in healthy Christian love. Remember Jesus' commandment invites us to love *our neighbor as ourselves* (Mark 28:31). It is also important to underline that while self-giving love (about which I will say much more in the following paragraphs) involves sacrifice, the Old Testament texts tell us that married love should be joyful and life-giving. Part of the mutuality of love involves mutual delight in each other.

#### LOVE AND INTIMACY: A PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEW

The ideal described above may seem too lofty, too far removed from the complexities of contemporary family life and the struggles of ordinary persons. Yet, as Christians we believe that we are created in the image of God in our potential for love. This means, in part, that when we strive toward our potential for love, we grow in expressing the best of our humanity, and any growth in this direction brings meaning, peace and joy even in the midst of daily struggles. In order to embark upon a journey of trying to live the ideal of Christian married love, descriptions by some psychologists of the tasks involved in such love can be very helpful. For instance, twentieth century psychoanalyst Eric Fromm describes the behaviors involved in self-giving love, which we just saw is basic to Christian married love. Fromm tells us,

What does one person give to another? He gives of himself, of the most precious he has, he gives of his life. This does not necessarily mean that he sacrifices his life for the other—but that he gives him of that which is alive in him; he gives him of his joy, of his interest, of his understanding, of his knowledge, of his humor, of his sadness—of all expressions and manifestations of that which is alive in him. [Fromm wrote before the advent of inclusive language.]

In marriage this implies that I share with my spouse simple things, like the sports that excite me, my experience of the boss I can't stand, that great piece of music I recently heard on the radio and want to download. I also share what is hurting me and troubling me, my worries about my job, my hopes and concerns for our children, my plans or worries regarding our finances. Or I share the ideas I have for saving and buying a new car, or my happiness at something I accomplished well at work. Notice that in describing giving of self Fromm is not speaking of ignoring oneself, or putting oneself aside. Rather, the giving Fromm describes requires that we know ourselves, that we be in touch with our own experience. This self knowledge and awareness is highly respectful of our dignity and value. Knowing and valuing ourselves, we are then willing to share this with our spouse. In fact, Evelyn and James Whitehead, psychologists specializing in Christian marriage, describe the development of "self-intimacy" as an important aspect of a spirituality of marriage (pp. 371-84). Self-intimacy means coming to know and accept oneself through honest, mutual sharing with spouse and children.

The sharing of self described by Fromm is central to the emotional closeness and friendship that cements married love. The Whiteheads describe this closeness and friendship as the virtue of intimacy necessary for a strong marriage partnership; indeed, intimacy, they assert, is the virtue at the heart of marriage (p. 218). When couples live the virtue of intimacy, they share what is most vital to them (desires, joys, struggles, fears, values, etc.), and they are willing to make themselves vulnerable through this sharing. I want to highlight that the virtue of intimacy requires *vulnerable* sharing, and such sharing is a form self-giving as described by Fromm. That is, in sharing with another what really

matters, what we really value, what really hurts, how we feel inadequate or weak, we expose ourselves to the other's reactions, and these reactions may be hurtful. We risk that the other will not care or will minimize our concerns or excitement about something. We risk conflict, disagreement, and criticism. Self-giving involves the willingness both to share what is most precious to us and to risk vulnerability. When we practice the virtue of intimacy, we choose such sharing for the sake of closeness and friendship. In marriage it is this kind of authentic sharing and risking of vulnerability that makes a true partnership of life and love possible (as described by Vatican II).

***Sexuality and the virtue of intimacy.*** While the virtue of intimacy is not about sexual closeness or about the emotional high of feeling in love, sexual union and physical affection are central to the unique form of intimacy that is marriage. As we saw in the Old Testament texts, physical delight in the other is a part of married love. Sexual intimacy that is *love-making* and not simply a form of physical pleasure also involves vulnerability and self giving. The married theologian William P. Roberts makes this point.

If intercourse is performed in a human way, that is, with mind and heart and soul, as well as with body, then the spouses, indeed, reveal themselves to each other in all of their nakedness, physical, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional. Such intimate exchange catches up all the intimate sharings in the rest of their marriage, and, in turn, enhances and enriches them (p. 133).

In other words, this kind of love-making is based on a friendship and partnership in the rest of married life. And we have just noted that the deep friendship and partnership of marriage require vulnerable sharing.

***Erich Fromm and the qualities of love.*** Fromm tells us that the kind of vulnerable giving of self just described involves a set of behaviors toward others. To say we love another with love that is life-giving and not just an emotion, we must act with knowledge, respect, responsibility and care. Knowledge is central because it involves being able to see the person as other, as different from me in her/his need, desires, preferences, etc. Knowledge of the other requires that we transcend our self-centered perspective and truly see the other. For instance, I have to be able to see that my partner, unlike me, is shy, or unlike me, doesn't like a certain

Self-giving involves the willingness both to share what is most precious to us and to risk vulnerability.

kind of music, or that her/his values regarding discipline for our children come from a radically different family history.

When I am able to see my partner on her/his own terms and not through the lens of my own perspective, I am able to offer respect for that person in her/his own dignity. When I respect, I will not exploit, dominate or possess. Rather, I choose actively to encourage who the other is even if different from me. For instance, I encourage my spouse to develop his/her interests (a golf game, an art class, etc); or I take time for involvement in my partner's extended family because to him or her this is very important, even if I would prefer other ways of spending our time. Or, I am willing to have patience with my spouse who struggles with something that is easy for me.

Knowledge and respect must be actively connected to responsibility and care. Responsibility means a willingness to respond, a willingness to become involved in the needs of the other. When my spouse needs my attention, or has a struggle she/he wants to share, I am willing to set time aside, to devote my energy and presence to listening and engaging in what is being shared. Willingness to respond is closely related to care, which involves actively working for the well-being of the other. Care implies that one is actively engaged in fostering that which is good for the other, given knowledge of their uniqueness, and respect for their needs separate from one's own. Fromm gives the simple example of persons who say they love plants but don't take responsibility for the feeding, watering and other tasks required for the plant to flourish.

Knowledge of the other, respect, responsibility and care foster the vulnerable sharing that makes possible the friendship and closeness of intimacy. Most of us can imagine being much more able to become vulnerable if we experience the other as knowing who we



Faithfulness involves a commitment to  
work toward knowledge, responsibility,  
respect and care.

really are; if we feel understood for who we really are. Most of us can be most vulnerable when we experience another responding with respect, responsibility and care as described by Fromm. We can imagine experiences of the opposite, namely becoming protective, defensive, and/or cautious, when we do not feel understood, when we share what is precious to us and it is not treated with respect, responsibility or care.

Vulnerability and the characteristics of love described by Fromm are also important for two essential elements of Christian love, namely, working through differences and being able to forgive. Working through differences becomes possible precisely when both are able to stand separately from one another and understand and respect the other in their difference. I can't really compromise with you well without understanding your point of view and why your point of view is important to you. One is more likely to make oneself vulnerable in negotiating differences, if one feels respected, known and cared about. I'm more willing to say what I really want and why, if I feel that you will respect what I say. When I experience that you respect me, my defensiveness decreases, and I am more able to hear your point of view, and I am more inclined to compromise. Similarly, these same characteristics of love are strong motivating attitudes in order to forgive. When I can get inside the shoes of the other with respect, my heart might soften with compassion. Our human resistance to forgiveness is decreased if we desire and are able to work out differences.

**Love, vulnerability and partnership of life.** The above descriptions of love and vulnerability are also helpful to living marriage as a *partnership* based on self-giving love (Vatican II's ideal). A partnership involves authentic communication of values, prefer-

ences and feelings; a marriage partnership implies that something is created from the input and interests of each of the spouses, and each spouse and their interests are equally important and valuable. So to create a partnership both spouses need to be able to share what is most important and valuable to them.

What partnership means to the life task of forming a marriage will have different meanings depending on the life experience of each partner. Unexamined gender roles learned in one's family and wider culture can implicitly affect the way a life partnership is imagined and lived; thus, couples need to reflect on what they understand to be involved in a life partnership and may need to journey toward new models of partnership. This journey requires the same behaviors described by Fromm and entails the vulnerable sharing of intimacy. Negotiating with one's partner how marriage is to be lived requires listening to the other with respect. Partnership requires responding to the other's particular perspectives and expectations with care. Conflicting visions of what is entailed in partnership require the capacity to address differences and conflict. Resolving conflicting visions of partnership will require repeated giving of self in listening, risking hurt, risking asserting one's views, and at the same time listening with respect and willingness to compromise. Compromise, in turn, also requires giving of self as one responds with respect and with care for the hopes, expectations and views of the other. Indeed, faithfulness in Christian marriage means in part a commitment to work toward those qualities of relationship that make for a partnership of love. Accordingly, faithfulness involves a commitment to work toward knowledge, responsibility, respect and care, and it also involves a commitment to work on resolving differences and engage in a process of coming to forgiveness.

#### LIVING IDEALS IS DIFFICULT

As I said at the beginning of this article, my goal has been to describe an ideal. I have emphasized that an ideal functions like a beacon that draws one on a journey, a light toward which one navigates. Similarly, like a beacon that sheds light for the path toward it, an ideal offers guidelines toward a goal, as well as the light of motivation to propel the journey. It is understood that few actually reach high ideals. Few become

Olympic athletes or astronauts, and few Christians live as did Mother Teresa or Dorothy Day. Nevertheless, ideals invite all of us to reach beyond where we are, to become better. In practical terms, an ideal serves as an invitation to embark on a journey toward a desired end, empowered by the hope that being on the journey itself will be meaningful and valuable to ourselves and those around us. Thus, the ideal of married love offered in this article invites readers to start or continue on an intentional journey toward trying to live self-giving love, trying to form vulnerable, intimate friendship in marriage, and trying to form a partnership with their spouse.

What is involved in the journey toward the ideal of Christian married love? First couples must articulate and desire the ideal. Second, couples have to choose to work actively toward the ideal. This choice is not easy; it often involves the challenge of acting against a number of cultural forces that surround, and therefore, affect all of us. For instance, the individualism of the culture, with a focus on the rights of persons [a good thing in many ways] has permeated the thinking of most of us, subtly orienting our focus to what we have a "right" to expect from others, including marriage partners. "He just doesn't fit my needs;" "I'm just no longer in love with her" are familiar statements by persons seeking divorce or getting involved with others outside of their marriages. I am not suggesting that there is anything wrong with expecting to receive from a partner. Indeed, living the kind of love described in this article would certainly meet deep human needs to receive love. And we saw that the Biblical texts celebrate couples desiring and enjoying each other. Rather, for the Christian, the challenge is understanding love as self-giving; understanding that journeying toward love as intimate friendship and partnership requires hard work. It requires hard work to know oneself, to transcend one's woundedness and selfishness, to be able to stand in the shoes of the other, to be compassionate and forgiving of our spouse.

Further, this kind of journey of growth and transformation requires God's healing grace and redemptive love and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, a significant part of the journey for a Christian couple involves choosing to engage in a relationship with God and in the spiritual practices that nurture and sustain such a relationship. These practices include participation in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, where we receive Jesus who is love

and through whom our own capacity to love is transformed. Other practices include personal prayer, prayer or spiritual reading as a couple, and prayer as a family.

There are other forms of help for the journey. Practicing love and living intimacy as described in this article require maturity. Thus any activity that promotes self knowledge and psychological growth, as well as healing of past hurts, is valuable. Such activities could range from attending Christian marriage enrichment programs such as Marriage Encounter, to reading self-help books on marriage, to engaging in couples' therapy or spiritual direction. In short, the journey toward the Christian ideal of married love requires a lifetime of growth. It takes time and therefore faithfulness to the committed relationship. Thus, the most significant step is the choice to embark on a journey toward the ideal.

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# Spirit-Led Leadership

Regina Bechtle, S.C.

At the outset, let me note that I am a Caucasian woman religious over 60 years of age, who has lived most of my life in the Northeast United States. My leadership experience includes eight years on the council of my religious congregation, serving on boards of not-for-profit organizations, chairing committees, and directing a leadership and spirituality center. I recognize that I am both blessed and limited by my culture, my age, my history and my experiences. I offer my reflections on spirituality and leadership as one person's perspective, one piece of the truth, in the hope that readers will enhance these insights with their own wisdom.

In this article, after briefly describing the context for leadership in today's post-modern, transitional times, and presenting my understanding of both leadership and spirituality, I offer some learnings drawn from my personal experience. Then I suggest four aspects of the role of spiritual leader. Lastly, I share some reflections on the particular role of religious leaders.



Any person who is called to leadership today faces a challenging task. This in-between time in our post-modern world is characterized by a sense of chaos and contingency, of suffering and limits, of isolation and fragmentation. Many nations and cultures in the developed world find themselves at a moral crossroads, without a sense of shared history and meaning, without belief in universal norms, unable to reach consensus on the common good. Society's institutions, once respected and trusted, have lost credibility, have sunk into corruption and greed, and have become unresponsive to the needs of those they were founded to serve. Many decry the seeming failure of our leaders, religious and secular, to awaken passion for a common human future. At the same time, the post-modern ethos has its constructive aspects: it values diverse viewpoints and experiences, and it seeks to build connections among peoples, nations, and with the cosmos.

Our transition-time in the evolution of the universe is called by some "The Great Turning." The term signals a time of danger and possibility, in which leaders play a particularly significant role.

## SPIRITUALITY AND LEADERSHIP

What is a leader? The spiritual writer Parker Palmer describes leaders as persons with an exceptional capacity to project onto others either their shadow or their light.

We know that those who are called to lead, especially but not exclusively in religious, human services, and not-for-profit organizations, are expected to bring a high level of professional competence. They need to have knowledge of their field, administrative ability, awareness of cutting-edge trends, and skill in building and leading a team. They must be able to relate well to those who work in the organization, those served by it, its donors, and civic officials.

But there is more to leadership, as Palmer's description indicates. Leaders need to be connected with their inner selves; they need to pay attention to the Spirit at the core of their spirits. They need to be persons with deep spiritual foundations, at home with their spirituality.

In these times of profound change, those who accept the spiritual dimensions of leadership, whether lay, religious, or clergy, call their organizations to remember who they are and what their mission is, just as the prophets of old did. They strive to see and inter-

Leaders need to be connected with their inner selves; they need to pay attention to the Spirit at the core of their spirits.

pret events within a larger context of meaning. For those in the Christian tradition, that larger context is, of course, the story of God's saving action, revealed in the history of Israel, embodied in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and continuing to flourish in the universe through the Spirit whom he gave us.

## ONE PERSON'S EXPERIENCE OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

When I began my term on the general council of my religious congregation, I knew that coming to terms with loss would be a major theme. Like most women's congregations in the United States, our median age was increasing, our numbers were decreasing, and many of our ministries were changing or closing. As spiritual leaders, we would need to help our sisters move beyond denial, anger, fear and all the other faces of resistance, and accept our reality as an invitation to discover new life within a "spirituality of diminishment" as described by Joan Chittister, O.S.B.

My eight years in leadership became for me a personal journey to Emmaus. I found that my plans, goals, visions and hopes for the community were deeply challenged, not just from external forces, as I had expected, but from within my own spirit. I wrestled with feeling both over-responsible and inadequate as a leader. I found that I had to reshape my understanding of myself, others and God radically.

Again and again I asked, "What does all of this mean, for me and for my congregation? Where is God in it all?" I searched for a way of making sense of leadership as a Spirit-filled activity. Then, in a shadowy way, I began to sense that my search was linked to larger patterns and movements among us and beyond us.

At the same time several major studies of religious life in the United States concluded, not surprisingly, that in times of massive organizational transition such as the present, leaders play a critical role, and that the



## Retelling this shadow side of your collective story can release the power of forgiveness, and free individuals to make their personal peace with the past.

quality of leadership is perhaps the most significant predictor of a community's viability. Gradually I came to see that my struggles were not just my own, and that, on several levels, they were signs of the Spirit's nudging—toward my own conversion of heart, toward the deeper renewal of my community and the larger communities of church and society which we served.

What have I learned about spiritual leadership? I sum up my learning in three statements which are my foundational premises: First, that **leadership is more about spirituality than about skills**. It always calls us to go deeper into the mystery of conversion and transformation.

Second, that **the journeys of transformation—personal, communal, and societal—are interwoven**. The efforts of leaders to transform their world and to guide their communities through the process of change are deeply interwoven with, and often mirror, the story of their own inner, personal transformation. And vice versa. Spirit inhabits both inner and outer landscapes, and leaders need to attend to both.

Third, that **the journey of one who would be a spiritual leader is a perennial work in progress**. What Ernest Hemingway said of writers is also true about leaders: "We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master."

In the remaining part of this article, I offer my reflections on several aspects of the role of spiritual leaders. I wish to address my words directly to leaders, whom I invite into an imaginary conversation with me, in the presence of the Spirit.

### SPIRITUAL LEADERS HOLD THE COMMUNITY'S STORY

As a leader, you know that your work always serves the community. In Catholic language, you share in the Spirit's work of building up the Body of Christ.

You exercise leadership in the context of a tradition that you have received. The collective history of your organization is a source of great strength, from which you will repeatedly drink as from a deep well.

You inspire your members to cherish the stories of those who have gone before you. You do this, not as an exercise in nostalgia, but rather as a confirmation that your group has a life larger than individuals, and its mission has a dynamism that has carried it through good times and hard times, with the help of God.

You also remind the group that its story is not all sweetness and light. It is shot through with human tragedies, mistakes, and sins. Retelling this shadow side of your collective story can release the power of forgiveness, and free individuals to make their personal peace with the past.

As leader, you hold in trust the deep story. You hold up this story like a mirror. You invite the group to claim it as the pattern of its most genuine identity. You invite each person to look deeply and discover his or her own part in it. And as you move through communal times of clarity, peace and joy, or grief, turmoil and doubt, the wisdom of the deep story can nourish you again and again, healing, encouraging and centering you.

But the organization's history is ongoing; its deep story continues to be written in the lives of today's members. This too, the new chapter as well as the old, has to be part of the story that you interpret and tell.

### SPIRITUAL LEADERS TRY TO SEE WHAT IS REALLY GOING ON

Everyone wants leaders with vision. Sometimes by vision, people really mean, "Predict the future. Read the signs and tell us what will happen to our group tomorrow, or next year." You know how impossible this is. In your leadership role, you are called to see clearly and name truthfully what is before you and around you. You are called to "look reality in the face and also communicate hope" as the Leadership Conference of Women Religious put it in "Dimensions of Leadership."

The spiritual leader constantly asks not only, "What is happening, in me and in the organization that I am called to lead?" but also the deeper questions, "What is *really* going on? What message is the Spirit of God writing in my journey, and in the ups and downs of our organization's story?" These questions are asked in times of crisis and diminishment, challenge and self-doubt, as well as in times of success and growth. As the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote: "The task is not so much to see what no one yet has seen, but to think what nobody yet has thought about that which everybody sees."

Is this not what Jesus did? He saw possibilities where others saw dead ends, he saw human goodness where others saw outcasts. So in order to see what is really going on, you will need to learn to see with God's eyes.

## PIRITUAL LEADERS TEND THE WHOLE BODY

A leader has to be attentive to the group's incarnate reality, to discern how its spirit takes flesh, here and now, at this moment in its history. To do this, you as leader must first take seriously your own incarnate reality.

- ▶ Listen to your body. Trust its wisdom. Know what it feels like when you are in balance and harmony, when you are acting from a deep center of energy and peace, and how that feels different from acting in driven and compulsive ways.
- ▶ Live the life you've been given. You have accepted the responsibility of leadership for a finite span of time. So let yourself be there. Acknowledge what you've left behind, grieve over it, but then get on with life. Apply your energy to the life you've been given, not to the one you wish you had.
- ▶ Know what you need to keep yourself healthy in body, mind, and spirit. Be faithful to keeping Sabbath time. Be disciplined about your own quest for spiritual, psychological and physical wholeness. The time you give to it is not a luxury; rather, it is of utmost significance for the group you lead.
- ▶ Do not try to carry the burden of leadership alone. Not even Moses was able to lead all by himself (see Exodus 18:18; Deuteronomy 1:12). Seek someone outside the organization with whom you can share your concerns, frustrations, and questions. Find a trusted counselor, spiritual director, or wisdom figure with no baggage or connection with your group, who can help you keep perspective on what is going on.

## TENDING THE BODY ALSO MEANS TENDING THE LIFE OF THE COMMUNITY

- ▶ You as the leader remind the group that it is truly one body, in the Pauline sense of the term. You balance the needs of its various members, foster healing, and channel the energies of all so the body works as one organism.
- ▶ You see to it that the organization is aware of itself. You create a climate where information can flow freely. By expanding ways for people to shape the group's dreams and decisions, you invite the whole body to become a community of learners, and help to demolish the myth of the leader as the expert who knows all the answers—a myth which you already know is false.
- ▶ You tend the body by discerning the Spirit's movement in the life of the group, and in the signs of the times that challenge and stretch it. You encourage

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members to develop the gift of a discerning heart. You reflect back to the group the sometimes disjointed notes of its own self-understanding. By accepting your role as leader, the community gives you authority to perform this ministry of discernment, of truth-telling in love, on its behalf.

- ◆ You tend the life of the group by identifying members who carry its Spirit-life. I know the director of a mobile soup kitchen in a poor section of New York City. She could name, among the homeless persons whom she served, those known by everyone as wise, grateful, patient, good listeners. Think about those in your organization who embody its spirit in tangible ways.
- ◆ Lastly, your role as a sort of spiritual director for the body makes you an advocate for healthy institutions. It is no secret that the institutional substructures of our society and of our churches are in serious trouble. But if we believe that God's Spirit acts within us as a people, then institutions are the soil in which God's Spirit plants seeds of community, and so leaders must pay attention to the spirituality of institutions.

Some years ago, I participated in a consultation on "The Spirituality of Trusteeship." I was the only Roman Catholic; the 12 other women and men included business people, ministers and lay leaders from Christian, Orthodox, and Jewish faith traditions. All we had in common was that we had served on boards or as administrators in institutions both religious and secular, and we were people for whom faith mattered a lot.

For a week, at a Benedictine monastery, we talked, prayed, shared stories and faith, and drew on the expertise of our experience, trying to figure out why institutional life was in such crisis, and why the job of tending and nurturing organizations—the job of leadership—seemed to sap energy instead of sparking it.

In the statement which we finally produced, we



Love in organizations, then, is  
the most potent source of power  
we have available.

said that we believed in the power of boards and other governance groups to be transformational, and that such transformation begins with, of all things, the creation of community within the board. To help us reconnect with our deepest resources of spirit, of community and of common purpose, we spoke of consciously adopted disciplines. We used the language of spirituality, not of organizational development, to describe those disciplines: discernment, listening, honesty, justice, love, humility, letting the Spirit work through us.

We spoke of our belief that our common life is at a point of crisis. Though we weren't sure we could continue to trust those institutions on which society depends for its welfare, institutions of which we ourselves were a part, yet we didn't give up on institutions. Rather, we joined our voices to the many others calling for renewed attention to their transformative potential.

#### SPIRITUAL LEADERS FOSTER COMMUNAL CONNECTIONS

With contemporary writers on organizations, you understand that group life, as well as the practice of leadership, is all about relationships. Listen to the poet David Whyte: "Whether it be the Berlin Wall, apartheid, the...old coercive Soviet system, or our own...old coercive business systems, it seems that any foundations not now built on the realities of human relationship are being swept away by the forces of our time."

In a world of broken connections, you witness that relationships are key. You are committed to building community as an antidote to "separatism, exploitation and vengeance," as the psychologist and religious leader Donna Markham, O.P., explains:

Leadership must be grounded in the capacity to stand in relationship, to foster connections across differences, to engage in dialogue in service of building global communion. Leaders who squander resources, use bully tactics, refuse dialogue, [and] devalue the vulnerable... are not only dangerous; they are acting in reckless violation of an emergent global ethic that reflects the simple mandate of the Golden Rule.... People who cannot relate should not be in leadership today. It is too dangerous to our survival....*Lack of connection* is the breeding ground for violence.

This attitude presupposes an understanding of power that differs radically from the world's prevailing view. It reflects the Gospel understanding of leadership as self-giving service, power used on behalf of the powerless and vulnerable. Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, founders of my congregation's spiritual tradition, understood this notion of power as service when they gave the name of "Sister Servant" to the local community leader.

Jesus fully possessed the power of the Spirit, gift of his *Abba*. Under the influence of that power, he healed, set free, empowered, raised up, and washed feet. What other leader, president, ruler, or head of state uses power this way?

As a spiritual leader following the example of Jesus, you seek to create and foster an atmosphere built on the power of love. Listen to organizational theorist Margaret Wheatley:

What gives power its charge, positive or negative, is the quality of relationships. Those who relate through coercion, or from disregard for the other person, create negative energy. Those who relate to others and who see others in their fullness create positive energy. Love in organizations, then, is the most potent source of power we have available. (Cited in Bennett Sims, *Servanthood: Leadership for the Third Millennium*.)

#### RELIGIOUS LIFE AND LEADERSHIP

Several years ago, I was part of a group that produced "Dimensions of Leadership" for women religious leaders in the United States. We identified three main dimensions—symbolic/meaning-making, relational, and organizational/structural—and abilities essential in each of them.

Spiritual leaders, we noted, are able to “connect the richness of the inner world with the significant challenges and movements of a given time.” They give priority to “developing and animating relational skills for themselves and others.” And they are able to recognize a group’s “culture and climate” and create “learning organizations.” All of these skills are Spirit-given and Spirit-led; all of them flow from and contribute to the leader’s spirituality.

Part of the mission of religious life and its leaders today, I believe, is to respond to our world’s profound hunger for spirituality and meaning. The institution of religious life has always witnessed to the presence of the Spirit in the midst of the most frightening chaos within and without, and to the peace that comes with giving oneself totally to the passionate search for wisdom, for God, even though that may lead through times of confusion and unknowing.

As those who hold their community’s story, religious leaders seek to channel, boldly and wisely, the profound Spirit-energies that gave birth to their congregations. As those who try to see with God’s eyes, they hope to summon the creative imagination that can dig deep underneath the multiple poverties of the world, the church, and their congregations, to uncover the abundance hidden there.

As those who are attentive to the whole body, religious leaders desire to reveal God’s transforming grace, hidden in unlikely places and faces. As those who have a passion for relationships and connections, they commit themselves to be relentless agents of reconciliation and peace, called to give and receive forgiveness.

## CONCLUSION

Whether lay or religious, Spirit-led leaders can be a rich resource for those who are seeking to connect inner and outer worlds. In conclusion, I return to my belief that there are intimate connections between the processes by which persons, communities and societies are transformed. I ask these questions of leaders:

- What wisdom can you learn from your personal experiences of transformation and conversion?
- How might the lessons you learn from your inner journey help you to make sense of the dynamics of dying and rising in your organization and in the larger world, and vice versa?
- How might religious leaders bring the inner world of their personal transformation into the outer world of influencing society?

- ♦ As a spiritual leader, how do you hold and tell the community’s story?
- ♦ How do you try to see the big picture, with God’s vision?
- ♦ How do you pay attention to the body that is yours and the body that you serve?
- ♦ How do you foster connections and relationships?

The foundress of the Sisters of Charity in the United States, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, led her community with vision, courage, and caring from 1809 to 1821. In the uncertainties of her time, as she sought to keep her Sisters focused on God and on their mission, she spoke often of the need to “meet our grace” in every circumstance, and to “keep well to...the grace of the moment.”

As she faced the challenges of leadership, she gave herself to God, in trust that God would use her gifts and limitations. May her gentle advice sustain all who seek to grow in spiritual leadership: “Go to [God] with faith, love and confidence—he will help. Fill yourself with his Spirit and *He himself will govern.*”

## RECOMMENDED READING

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# *In the Season* of Grief

Mary Elizabeth Kenel, Ph.D.

For everything there is a season,  
and a time for every matter under heaven;  
A time to be born and a time to die;  
A time to weep and a time to laugh;  
A time to mourn and a time to dance.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 4



There are seasons in our lives that seem to be characterized in large measure by growth and joy. For many of us, the periods of adolescence and young adulthood marked times when everything and anything seemed possible, when each day brought new and exciting challenges and activities. At least in retrospect, life as we enjoyed it during those periods appeared to be relatively carefree with moments of sorrow and loss short-lived. But, as the scripture verses quoted above remind us, we also experience other, darker seasons in the course of a lifetime. While death and other losses may occur at any point, it is particularly when family members, friends, and we ourselves move into the middle and later years of life, that we face painful periods of diminishment and loss requiring that we accept and carry out the work of grief and mourning. As we perform this work, difficult as it is, we move ourselves from a state of bereavement to one of renewal.

Grief is a multifaceted response to loss and life-changing events. Although we tend to focus on the emotional facets of grief, there are also physical, cognitive, behavioral, social, philosophical, spiritual and religious dimensions that might be considered. If we do not shun the pain and the work of the grieving process, healing and personal growth may be the fruits of this sorrowful transition that authors Sandi Caplan and Gordon Lang refer to as making "Grief's Courageous Journey."

## COMMON TERMS

It may be helpful to examine some of the terms commonly used when speaking about grief. While these words are often used interchangeably, some recognition of the nuances of meaning they hold may be helpful.

The grieving process is initiated whenever we suffer a significant loss. Loss has been defined as an event that results in permanent inaccessibility of an emotionally important figure. We may experience an actual loss when a significant person dies, when a divorce occurs, or when an important job or position has ended. Losses may also embody a symbolic element as well. We frequently see this at the time of retirement from the workforce, for example. The newly retired person often experiences a sense of ego depletion, as the identity tied to his or her work role is lost. Symbolic losses may also be entwined with the loss of a significant person as we lose the piece of our identity that was tied to that person. Following the deaths of our parents, for example, we no longer fill the role of son or daughter, and this loss of identity may lead to a perception of ourselves as adult orphans. Even more painful is the loss of a child for, along with the loss of the parent role (at least in relation to that particular child), the piece of our identity that would have traveled into the future with the child is lost.

Bereavement is a state we endure after experiencing a loss and encompasses a wide range of emotions and changed conditions that result from that loss. Grief, on the other hand, represents the particular reactions we experience while in a period of bereavement. These reactions may include anger, guilt, sadness, confusion, diminished concentration, non-specific physical complaints and fatigue, and even despair. Although grieving is a natural process that occurs across cultures, both ancient and modern, the expression of grief is highly individual within the parameters of a culture.

Mourning represents the culturally defined acts that are usually performed after a death. Our society, and to say, tends to relegate mourning to the realm of the private and personal, save in the case of a notable national or local figure who lies in state at a relevant site, for example the rotunda of the state or the national capitol or in a cathedral. Unlike the customs of ear-

The season of grief is traversed slowly.

lier generations in which mourning lasted for at least one year, during which time the bereaved wore black or dark-colored clothes, our rituals are over too swiftly to allow us to process and absorb the loss we have sustained.

## BEREAVEMENT RITUALS

Recently the helpful role of ritual seems to have been rediscovered and persons working in bereavement ministries have returned to older traditions of mourning. Following the death of a longtime member, one worshipping community introduced personalized memorial rituals at 30, 60 and 90 days after death. One of the most beautiful rituals in which I participated followed upon the death of a member of the women's spirituality group to which I belong. Using the image of a Monarch butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, we prayed for a period of forty days following Dorothy's death. Although geographically distant, we made a point to pray at a set time, knowing that our prayers were joined in celebrating our friend's life and sharing the pain of her death. Bereavement ministers also have revived or devised rituals to celebrate an annual communal commemoration of the dead often linked to the feasts of All Saints and All Souls, or as it called now, the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed. Still other rituals, some private and others communal, have been introduced to commemorate the anniversary of a loved one's death. Those engaged in grief counseling often assist bereaved persons to construct and carry out some form of ritual that would serve to commemorate the deceased person's life and accomplishments while allowing them to let go of the lost loved one and begin the transition to a new life in which the deceased person is not present.



A “flight into health” is a sort of phenomenon in which the necessary period of sadness and grief is submerged in a round of frantic or ill-advised activity.

## THE SEASON OF GRIEF

The season of grief is traversed slowly. It takes time to deal with the pain of fresh grief and to release the lost person. It is difficult to adjust to a world in which the deceased person no longer exists and to forge a new identity with new roles and new relationships. As a result, the length of time spent grieving is different for each person. The impact of a particular death and the course of the bereavement that follows the death are influenced by a variety of factors. Variations in the mourning process are observed when we take into consideration the age, gender, family background and ethnicity, the personality makeup, and physical and mental health of both the deceased and the bereaved persons. In addition, the presence of a high level of ambivalence toward the deceased person and the presence of greater than average dependency behaviors on the part of the bereaved person also have a significant influence on the mourning process.

Other factors that influence the course of bereavement include the level of social support available to the bereaved. Grief tends to lead us into a period of necessary withdrawal, but this period is more painful when we perceive that family and social supports are lacking. Our level of preparedness also affects the process of mourning for the death or other loss. There is greater shock and reluctance to absorb the finality of the death if it was a sudden or unanticipated event. This is especially true when the cause of death involves a form of violence, such as a car accident, a shooting, or some type of criminal activity. The post-death mourning period may be shortened, however, if the cause of

death was a chronic illness that allowed us sufficient time to perform anticipatory grieving.

The length of time required for working through the grieving process is also influenced by the bereaved person's relationship to the deceased, e.g., one's child, parent, spouse, sibling, or friend. Still other factors include the role of religion or faith. For some, religious faith or spirituality offers a measure of comfort. In other instances, however, the death shakes the bereaved person's very belief in the presence of a benevolent God. Mourning may also be prolonged if the death carried some form of social stigma, for example, a suicide or dying of AIDS, which prevented the grieving person from seeking social support in the larger community. The grieving process may also be influenced by the presence of concurrent crises such as financial instability or loss of one's home due to the death of the person who filled the role of provider.

## RECENT RESEARCH ON BEREAVEMENT

Recent advances in brain imaging have identified activation in brain areas that make it very difficult for some of us to let go and move through the phases of mourning. A recent study conducted by Mary Frances O'Connor of the University of California at Los Angeles and reported in the *Washington Post* 8/05/08 revealed that in one form of complicated grief activation of the brain area known as the nucleus accumbens leads to a persistent longing for the loved person and a tendency to conjure up reveries of the person. One of the therapeutic tasks required in a situation of this type is to help our “thinking brain” integrate its knowledge of the reality of the loss with our “emotional brain” that craves the past relationship and refuses to adapt to the new reality. Many persons who work in grief counseling are aware of the bereaved person's need to repeat the details of their loved one's death many times over before coming to an acceptance of the reality of the loss. This repetition, rather than signaling that the person is “stuck” in a particular phase of grief, appears to foster the transfer of learning from the “thinking brain” to the “emotional brain” where it can be integrated into a new schema of the self and the world.

In the past, a positive outcome of the work of mourning was identified as one in which the bereaved person survived the loss, remarried (if the spouse died), tried new experiences and formed new relationships.

t this time, however, researchers and clinicians who deal with bereavement issues exercise caution in reaching that conclusion. In some instances, individuals use the preceding activities to distance themselves from the real work of mourning. Their adjustment, although seemingly positive when viewed behaviorally, is actually an obstacle to the real growth and renewal that follows completion of the work of mourning. One might think of this as a “flight into health” sort of phenomenon in which the necessary period of sadness and grief is submerged in a round of frantic or ill-advised activity.

While most of us are likely to consider psychological growth and enjoyment of a full social life positive outcomes of the bereavement process, psychologist Catherine M. Sanders, who is also a certified grief therapist, noted in her book *Grief: The Mourning After* that at times completion of grieving brings about no substantial change in a person or in the person’s lifestyle. Others may even experience an adverse change in health or in their social and occupational functioning.

In addition to outlining these three phases of grief, Rando identified six “R” processes that we must undertake and work through to bring about resolution of our loss. These “R” processes include:

- 1 Recognize our loss.
- 2 React to our separation from the deceased person.
- 3 Recollect and Re-experience the deceased and our relationship to him or her.
- 4 Relinquish the old attachments to the deceased and our former organization of our personal world.
- 5 Readjust to move adaptively into the new world without forgetting the old.
- 6 Reinvest in new relationships, interests, and social roles.

We might image the work of mourning as weaving, moving the shuttle back and forth on the loom of our lives, picking up the various strands of thread cut by the loss of a significant person and slowly integrating the various pieces into a new pattern as our lives once again become whole cloth.

Sanders observed that time limits placed on grieving persons might be a source of difficulty with grief resolution. Recognizing that there are enormous individual differences and variations in working through the grieving process, she cautions against the use of terms such as “pathological grief.” In her opinion, those working with grieving persons in therapy or in a bereavement ministry need to be sympathetic to and understanding of the differences in the situations surrounding the bereaved and their unique ways of dealing with their grief. In her opinion each person’s way of dealing with grief is the “right way” for that individual and ought not to be judged against an artificial standard of what is “normal.”

Psychiatrist John Bowlby, known primarily for his theories on attachment and loss, viewed grieving as an ebb and flow process. He perceived the bereaved person moving between shock and numbness, yearning and searching, entering a period of disorganization and despair before coming to the point where a healthy reorganization of one’s life was able to be achieved.

Therese Rando, clinical psychologist, thanatologist and author of a number of books and articles on various aspects of bereavement, outlined three phases of grief and mourning: avoidance, confrontation, and accommodation. Although she treated each stage separately, she also indicated that we do not necessarily pass through these stages in a linear fashion but move back and forth as the work of each phase is engaged and integrated. Using her model, we might image the work of mourning as weaving, moving the shuttle back and forth on the loom of our lives, picking up the various strands of thread cut by the loss of a significant person and slowly integrating the various pieces into a new pattern as our lives once again become whole cloth.



Sanders suggests that a large part of healing actually reflects a shift from the internalized concept of doing without, namely, “learning to live without my beloved” to a more positive and affirming concept, “learning to live more independently with myself.”

Rando indicated that the initial phase she referred to as avoidance was relatively short and served primarily as a buffer while the bereaved person attempted to absorb the reality of the loss. We might think of this stage as analogous to Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’ first stage in coming to acknowledge our own impending death or the death of a loved one, that of denial. Rando identified the second phase, termed confrontation, as the time for coming to grips with the loss, acknowledging the pain of separation, and dealing with the fluctuating emotions, such as anger and sadness, that are experienced. This period is initiated at a time of acute grief but, as we mourn actively, there is a gradual construction of a world in which the deceased is no longer physically present. The third phase, that of accommodation, focuses on learning to live with the loss and to restructure our lives accordingly, despite the presence of an enduring sadness.

Building on the work of Rando and others, Sanders outlined a comprehensive, five-phase theory of grief. Her descriptions included an overview of each phase and are especially useful for those working in bereavement ministry as they indicate the physical symptoms as well as the psychological aspects associated with each phase. For example, among the physical symptoms of phase one, named shock, she noted sighing, weeping, loss of muscular power, disturbed sleep and appetite and preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased. Phase two, termed awareness of loss, included such phenomena as feelings of anger, guilt and shame in conjunction with the psychological aspects of searching for the deceased, sensing the presence of the lost loved one and dreaming of the deceased. Sanders

named the third phase of grief conservation-withdrawal. She saw this period as characterized by fatigue, increased need for sleep and problems related to a weakened immune system, while on the psychological front the bereaved person was maintaining a state of hibernation or a holding pattern. The fourth phase, that of healing, was accompanied by increased physical energy. The psychological tasks of that phase included forgiving and forgetting while searching for meaning, closing the circle and experiencing a sense of hope. This sense of hope initiated the fifth phase of grief, that of renewal. In this phase the grieving person experienced a sense of physical revitalization and functional stability. Although anniversary reactions and loneliness were a part of this phase, renewal was also characterized by a sense of being able to live for oneself while reaching out to others.

#### HEALING IN THE CONTEXT OF GRIEF

When we speak of healing in the context of grief and mourning, a number of different factors might be considered such as diminution of a specific physical symptom, a sense of increased physical energy, or a general brightening of our attitude and outlook on life. Sanders suggests that a large part of healing actually reflects a shift from the internalized concept of doing without, namely, “learning to live without my beloved” to a more positive and affirming concept, “learning to live more independently with myself.” Viewed from this perspective, a period of bereavement has the potential to open us to a new stage in our life cycle; thus what was initially perceived as an ending holds within it the seed of a new beginning. For many persons, this cognitive and emotional shift is brought about as they assume greater control of their lives and, in the process, develop a sense of competence. As is true of every other aspect of the grieving process, however, developing a positive sense of control and competence is slow work. Those involved in bereavement ministry or those engaged in some form of grief counseling need to proceed with great sensitivity, offering continued support while also pointing out opportunities that have the potential to lead to increased competence and confidence in dealing with the larger world.

One of the major aspects of the “learning to live more independently with myself” phase of healing lies in our ability to take on the tasks required if we are to

restructure our identities. During what Sanders describes as the third phase of grief, that of withdrawal and hibernation, we tend to hide ourselves in the cocoon of our homes or reduce our interaction with others if we are obliged to return to work. Our social lives during this phase tend to be very limited as interpersonal interaction is a strain on us and can be wearing as well on those who attempt to offer social support.

During this period, participation in a support group has the potential to be very beneficial. Where in other settings one has to disguise one's negative feelings or maintain a cheerful social façade, these groups, composed of persons who are also in a state of bereavement, offer a safe haven where we can share our experiences and concerns without fear that others will lose patience, judge harshly, or attempt to hurry us through the phases of grief. Depending on the nature and composition of the group, participants may offer each other practical assistance in negotiating the mundane issues that must be dealt with following a death. Through the sharing of their experiences, the group members also assist in validating a person's reactions to a particular loss and the length of time, be it long or short, spent in a particular phase of grieving. Above all, however, the group members offer each other the gift of patient listening as stories are told and re-told in the process of accepting the finality of death and the loss of the loved one.

## GRIEF RESOURCES

Thanks to the surge in popularity of on-line groups and participation in a variety of web-based communities, there are many resources that provide information regarding organizations or websites for coping with grief. These may prove to be especially helpful when persons are working their way through the phase of conservation and withdrawal. GriefNet ([www.griefnet.org](http://www.griefnet.org)), for example, is a professionally directed on-line grief support community. Its fifty monitored support groups cover the loss of a parent, a child, a spouse, and a friend as well as the loss of a pet. Growth House, Inc. ([www.growthhouse.org](http://www.growthhouse.org)) is a source of information and resources related to death and dying issues. The National Mental Health Information Center also provides information on the grieving process as well as additional resources for coping with grief.

The ache of loneliness stirs our desire to connect with others.

As we continue to work our way through the grieving process and come to terms with the fact that our loved one is gone from us, we need to release the piece of our identity that was tied to that person and begin to flesh out a new identity for our selves. One aspect of this work requires that we relinquish roles we no longer actually hold. The process in which we engage might be viewed as a work of resurrection or transformation and a search for renewed meaning in our lives. Often, during this phase of the mourning process we come to realize the need to find new ways of sharing our lives with others. After being widowed, socializing with the group of friends in which we participated as part of a couple might no longer be comfortable for us. Time that was once devoted to a spouse or to shared activities may need to be re-evaluated and restructured. The process of reconstructing and reshaping our identities is painful, and the tasks cannot be rushed. Yet each step offers us the opportunity to develop an expanded sense of self and a richer, more highly developed identity.

As our new self develops from the ashes of our former life, we enter what Sanders termed the fifth phase of grief, that of renewal. A new level of self-awareness that opens us up to freedom to choose among the alternatives and possibilities that are available to us characterizes this phase of life. Persons who have worked their way through the grieving process are often surprised to discover a sense of centeredness and stability, as well as qualities of courage in the face of adversity and compassion for others that were not as prominent a part of their former self.

Those who perform the various tasks of ego restructuring successfully are those who manage to



## Learning to live simply may also be one of the fruits of a period of grief.

bring to birth a high level of emotional independence, supplying themselves with emotional satisfaction and security rather than expecting it to come from others, be it from parents, friends, or a spouse. Sanders identifies emotional independence as “Living for Oneself.” While this skill might be learned at other times in life, often it is only after we have suffered the feelings of isolation that accompany us in a season of grief that we begin to examine and address our unconscious abandonment issues. Learning to deal with loneliness, a lack of felt purpose, and a sense of emptiness without being overwhelmed by these feelings is far from easy. The task involves establishing an intimate relationship with ourselves, learning to center ourselves, tuning in to our inner life and ideals rather than distracting ourselves by constant busyness or socializing. Those already familiar with centering prayer or other meditation practices have likely developed the basics of this skill. Other avenues that have the potential to lead to the centering that fosters emotional independence include psychotherapy, reading and study that focus on self-awareness and personal development.

We are not intended to live in a rarified atmosphere, focused solely on ourselves, however. The ache of loneliness stirs our desire to connect with others, although our way of relating to people is likely to be different than it was prior to the loss of our loved one. We need to learn to find substitutes for the emotional resources we once took for granted while recognizing that there will never be an exact replacement of that which was lost. Care must be taken not to rush into the search for substitutes, particularly if the substitute is

another person, a partner to replace a lost spouse or a new child to replace one that died. Although the desire to find a person who will replace our lost spouse and restore the emotional resources the former relationship provided can prove to be a positive outcome of the grieving process, yielding to the urgent need fueled by separation anxiety that often is experienced in the earlier stages of mourning might lead us to make a poor choice. At times, in seeking an exact replacement for the person we lost, we may delude ourselves, thinking we perceive the good qualities of the former spouse in the new partner only to discover that the person’s real nature is a far cry from what we believed it to be. At other times, we may try to mold a new partner or a replacement child into a fixed pattern, without giving thought to the unrealistic demands we are making on the person. The work of mourning must be carried out until a new level of functioning can be attained. Only at this point can we make wise choices that respect the reality of the other person and the new developments that have occurred in ourselves.

### LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM BEREAVEMENT

Having worked through the various stages of grief and having emerged renewed, we might do well to reflect on some of the lessons to be learned from our experience of this season of life. Reflecting on the inevitability of diminishment, loss and death might inspire us to show greater appreciation for the gift of time we have been given. Rather than hurrying through our days, we might give the gift of time to ourselves by providing time for reflection. We might also give the gift of time to those we love, spending time with them, listening to their hopes and dreams or their experiences of frustration and sadness. We might find ourselves more inclined to live in the present, letting go of past resentments and future worries about which we can do nothing.

Learning to live simply may also be one of the fruits of a period of grief. Things that once seemed so important may be re-evaluated in the dark light of loss. We may be prompted to reassess our need for goods that clutter our basements or attics, recycling those that may be of use elsewhere and letting go of those that are unnecessary. Of greater importance, however, may be letting go of unrealistic, rigid standards that

lock our creativity and stifle our ability to share in a living way with the significant persons who are present in our lives.

Another major lesson to be learned as we emerge from a season of grief is surely that of patience. The slow work of mourning and our almost imperceptible movement into a new phase of life challenges us to rethink our need to live life in the fast lane. Coming to respect the organic nature of the grief and growth processes allows us to develop greater serenity as we move through the seasons of our lives and free ourselves from the tyranny of the social expectations and go-demands that constrict us.

Above all, however, the fruit of our grieving and mourning is a renewed appreciation for the gift of relationships. Knowing there are people who care for us and who are willing to be present to us during a time of bereavement is a wonderful source of solace. As we experience the chilly grip of isolation, their attentiveness reminds us that we are not alone although we may feel a terrible sense of disconnection from others. As our family ties are stretched thin by actual losses and by distance, the experience of grief reminds us to strengthen our ties with those who constitute our family of friends. This family may be composed of coworkers, neighbors, members of our worshipping community or those with whom we share a special bond through love of music or other area of interest. All the better for us if our family of friends includes persons younger than ourselves as these relationships serve to give us a stake in the future. Expressing appreciation for small favors, remembering birthdays, sharing in the everyday joys and sorrows, laughter and tears of life

weaves us into the fabric of a social network that is available to offer support in times of bereavement.

As we experience a season of grief in our lives, let us hold fast to the hope of renewal and resurrection, recalling "for everything there is a season."

#### RECOMMENDED READING

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National Mental Health Information Center  
[http:// mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications](http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications)



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# Love Trumps Fear

Brenda McLaughlin

A few years ago, I decided to give up being a perfectionist for Lent. I failed miserably. I like to think that if I were in charge of the world, I would be perfect and everyone around me would be perfect, too. Yet, if that were so, I would never have known Reverend Patrick J. Curran: the precious gift of his imperfect presence, the light in his eyes, or his blessing. For the last decade, I have lived next door to my parish's rectory. My apartment building shares the church's parking lot. Often, I crossed paths with Fr. Curran as he walked along the driveway with his breviary. He'd happen to stroll in my direction (on purpose, I think!) and feign surprise when he nearly bumped into me saying, "Oh, it's you!" I would always beg, "Fr. Curran, are you praying for me?" As if I were the only one in the world, or at least the only one who mattered. With the lilting tones of his Irish brogue he would say in reply, "No, I can't get Him on the line. He's out of the office. He must be off somewhere in Tahiti. I can't reach Him." I loved how his eyes sparkled as he teased me like that, and I adored him as I would a dear uncle; feeling warm and safe beside him. I also knew that, in a playful way, Fr. Curran revealed to me both his vulnerability and his faith. He showed me





ow to live a life of service, even in dry times. Like my  
andmother who suffered many years with painful  
thritis, Fr. Curran used to say, "Don't get old."

For years, he had a hacking cough. In recent  
onths, he showed signs of frailty. A host of medical  
problems were taking their toll. I was impressed by his  
commitment to serve God and His people. In contrast  
our capitalistic society in which productivity and the  
ottom line reign supreme, Fr. Curran took his dimini-  
shment to the altar. I worried, sometimes, he might  
collapse, and I was ready to reach for my cell phone to  
call 911 at any moment. But more, I was touched by  
his courage, by his priesthood, and by the sight of him  
before the crucifix as he consecrated bread and wine,  
joining his own suffering to that of God. It is no won-  
der that Fr. Curran couldn't "get Him on the line." God  
was no distance at all. There was no line.

It pained me as I heard some complain that he had  
become grumpy. I get grumpy, too! Thank goodness Fr.  
Curran was human. It warmed my heart to see those  
who assisted him at the altar with genuine love and  
compassion. I liked knowing that someone I loved was  
in kind and capable hands. I like knowing that perhaps  
with all of my imperfection, can still be loved, too

I visited Fr. Curran daily during what turned out to  
be the last week of his life. Despite my deep and abid-  
ing fear of hospitals, I felt drawn to be near him. What  
a grace-filled week it was! Armed with volumes of Irish  
poetry, I sat beside him reading Yeats and Seamus  
Heaney. Together, we fell into the rhythm of the poets'  
words and were caught by line after line of raw beauty  
and elegance and grace. I didn't know, then, that he  
was dying. I did know, though he was heavily sedated  
and only sometimes semi-conscious, Fr. Curran blessed  
me day after day by the mere fact of his presence. It  
was more than exquisite poetry that nearly took my  
breath away. Fr. Curran was actively giving his entire,  
vulnerable self as a conduit of grace. If that isn't the  
mark of a holy man, then I don't know what is.

A flutist by avocation, I had the privilege to play at  
Fr. Curran's funeral. Stage fright often presents its ugly,  
sharp talons when I play in public, leaving me to play  
while fighting its voracious grip. I can think of nothing

I was touched by his courage, by his  
priesthood, and by the sight of him before the  
crucifix as he consecrated bread and wine,  
joining his own suffering to that of God.

but how I want my music to be, of course, perfect. But Fr.  
Curran's funeral was different. I was different. I was changed.

As my accompanist and I rehearsed that morning,  
well before the funeral Mass, the casket arrived as we  
played Schubert's *Ave Maria* and the Irish tune, *Danny  
Boy*. I didn't know that we would be the ones to wel-  
come Fr. Curran's body into the church for the last  
time. From there on, I nearly forgot my very self. Or  
perhaps I found myself for the first time. I could not  
have cared less if one person, zero, or ten thousand  
people were present. Honoring Fr. Curran's life and his  
priesthood were all that mattered. In having that sin-  
gle-minded, pure intention, I discovered a deep well  
from which to draw and for once, I was divinely guid-  
ed more than I was trying to steer the divine.

I suppose there are many saints among us dis-  
guised as cranky, old, or wounded people. They proba-  
bly pass right in front of me regularly, and I don't even  
blink an eye. Fr. Curran is one I didn't miss. I knew  
him and I loved him. I love him still. Love is greater  
than fear. He taught me well.



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# Book Review

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*In Fulfillment of Their Mission: The Duties and Tasks of a Roman Catholic Priest. An Assessment Project.* By Joseph Ippolito, Mark A. Lacovich, and Joyce Malyn-Smith. Washington, DC: NCEA Publications, 2008. 90 pages. \$24.00.

The attempt to give analytical articulation to all that might be involved in exemplary priestly performance is a notoriously difficult assignment. It has been the subject of endless hours of debate, particularly among seminary faculties entrusted by their respective denominations to turn out model pastoral practitioners. The tension inherent between the perspective of a priestly call to mediate the numinous in service of a gathered church community and that of the day-to-day pastoral services expected of an acculturated American presbyter makes the project inherently dicey.

Acknowledging those obstacles, the authors have performed a valuable service. Working with a resource panel of experienced pastors they have produced a tool that may be profitably studied and practically utilized by seminary faculties, directors of priestly formation, and individual priests. It can serve as a resource for assessing one's own growth in ministerial competence and service or clarifying one's responsibility as a formator of priest candidates. For example, the graded descriptors for advancement from the minimum competence of a novice to that of a highly competent practitioner under each of the nine broad areas of priestly service is a quite helpful device.

That said, some further caveats are in order.

This reviewer found it disturbing to see the authors sliding back and forth between the language of "priest" and "pastor." In Catholic circles the distinction between an ordained presbyter and one who has the further canonical delegation to leadership of a parish community is highly significant. At times it is not clear whether the authors are using "pastor" in that canonical sense or simply to connote a pastoral agent without further distinction. There are many Catholic priests who have given outstanding service for years and years who simply are not suited to be pastor of a parish community.

More substantively from the perspective of method (not to mention ecclesiological understanding), the directors of the project seem to have left out the voices of the laity when enlisting people to validate the lists of duties and tasks expected of a contemporary priest. Presumably it is the lay faithful who are the ultimate validators of effective spiritual service. Admittedly, a body of people as broad as "the laity" is a difficult elephant to get one's arms around, but in the absence of such an effort the project runs the risk of being a self-validating conversation among a closed circle of professionals. My own sense is that a random body of the lay faithful would probably agree with most of the categorization of duties and competences. But it is equally possible that from their experience of clericalized incumbents they might have presented more pointed definitions of what might be expected in particular areas—and perhaps point to actual new areas latent within their live interaction with priests. Priestly service is, after all, inherently relational.

Ultimately the value of an effort like this one depends on the personal and spiritual depth of those who use it. It would not be amiss to compare the effort to that of our country's "No Child Left Behind" project. Results from that national effort illustrate the risk that practitioners may distort the proposed benchmarks, and ultimately violate the deeper spirit behind the project, by "teaching to the test." That need not represent a black mark against such teachers. It is simply the nature of the genre.

In the hands of formators who are themselves sensitive, priestly (read: unclericalized) ministers, this inventory can provide a good opening for fruitful discernment with candidates for the priesthood or for those who have labored long in the vineyard. It is one tool, nicely crafted, in the arsenal of sophisticated skills needed to support the art of ministerial formation and assessment.

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